“Developing all these petals”: a narrative study of the strategies and networks African American women at historically white institutions access, create, and employ to succeed

DaVida L. Anderson

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“Developing all these petals”: A Narrative Study of the Strategies and Networks African American Women at Historically White Institutions Access, Create, and Employ to Succeed

by

DaVida L. Anderson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in
Educational Policy and Leadership Studies (Higher Education and Student Affairs) in the
Graduate College of The University of Iowa

August 2019

Thesis Supervisor: Assistant Professor Jodi L. Linley
This labor of love is dedicated to my family:
Sylvia (Mom), David (Dad), David II (Brother), my ancestors, and students whose success I will support.
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ABSTRACT

African American women continue to enroll at historically White institutions (HWIs) to pursue their bachelor’s degrees (Miller, 2017). These women continue to experience exclusion (Zamani, 2003) and hostile environments (Evans, 2007; Patton & Croom, 2017; Zamani, 2003) that marginalize and minoritize African American women. Nevertheless, African American women continually attend HWIs (Miller, 2017) and succeed in higher education (Miles, Jones, Clemons, & Golay, 2011). Although access in the United States has increased for racially minoritized populations, decades of research on racial climates at HWIs have established campus racial climates that range from chilly (Pascarella, Whitt, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, Yeager, & Terenzini, 1997) to toxic (Howard-Hamilton, 2015).

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) has illuminated the ways African American women’s lives cannot be explored by examining race or gender in isolation of their other identities, yet most higher education research about African American students view them as one group. The scholarship does not adequately inform higher education leaders and educators about the pathways to African American college women's success.

The purpose of this study was to engage African American undergraduate women’s narratives about their experiences at HWIs toward an understanding of the strategies and networks they access, create, and employ to succeed. The fifteen participants in this study attended six different HWIs in the Midwest United States. The findings explain the ways participants experienced various environmental influences, leaned on and built networks, and developed self-concept toward their success. The findings are umbrellaed into three categories: (1) environmental influence, (2) networks, (3) self. In the category of environmental influences, I identified two themes: (a) paradoxical climate and (b) white
supremacist gaze. Three themes emerged in the category of African American women’s networks: (a) “Melanin Corner” (b) circles of support: "second set of eyes” and (c) building strategic networks. The final category of findings about African American women’s conceptions of self had three themes: (a) unapologetically me, (b) armor to succeed, and (c) conceptions of success. Together, the findings illuminated a host of practical and research implications. The implications provide direction for practice, theory, and research. The significance of this study is in its potential to inform higher education and student affairs educators toward better supporting African American women as they develop strategies to succeed at HWIs.
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

African American women continue to enroll at historically White institutions (HWIs) to pursue their bachelor’s degrees (Miller, 2017). African American women continue to experience exclusion (Zamani, 2003) and hostile environments (Evans, 2007; Patton & Croom, 2017; Zamani, 2003) that demean African American women. Nevertheless, African American women persist and succeed in higher education. Although access in the United States has increased for non-white populations, decades of research on discriminatory environments at historically white colleges and universities creating campus climates that are unwelcoming towards African American women. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) focuses on how African American women’s lives cannot be explored without consideration other multiple identities. In spite of the challenging campus climate, African American women continue to attend HWIs (Miller, 2017) and succeed (Miles, Jones, Clemons, & Golay, 2011). Prior research does not adequately explore the pathways to African American college women’s success. The purpose of this study is to investigate the strategies and networks of African American undergraduate women access, create and employ to succeed while attending historically white institutions.
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I am successful with the help of strong relationships that were built during college loving, unconditional, loud. I am an African violet, independent. I am family and sisters. I am supportive and relief from outside forces. I am using your resources and don’t quit. I am Black woman. I am loved, persevering and strong in ice-cream sundae, fried chicken. I am strong willed, driven, and humbled I will create diversity and inclusion. I am me with all of my identities without all of them I would be someone different. My success gives me the resources and outlets to help those in need as well as create a more stable environment for myself.

~Ashley

CHAPTER I

Introduction

The racial composition of students entering historically white higher education institutions (HWIs) in the United States (U.S.) looks drastically different and more diverse than the student bodies of the past (Manning Muñoz, 2011, Levine & Dean, 2012). Overall enrollment for African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian/Pacific Islander has increased (The National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018); specifically, women’s enrollment has increased respectively for each race/ethnicity. From fall 1976 to fall 2015, the percentage of African American students in U.S. degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased from 10 percent in 1976 to 14 percent in 2015; however, the 2015 percentage reflected a slight decrease since 2011, when they contributed towards 15 percent of enrollment in the U.S. Numbers for Hispanic students showed an increase from 4 percent to 17 percent of all U.S. enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, and the percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander students increased from 2 percent to 7 percent (The National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). A slight increase was reported in enrollment numbers for American Indian/Alaska Native students, increasing in 2015 (0.8 percent) compared to their enrollment in 1976 (0.7 percent). During this time period, the enrollment of White students decreased from 84 percent to 58
percent (The National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). Despite increasing access for racially minoritized populations, decades of research on racial climates at HWIs have established campus racial climates that range from chilly (Pascarella, Whitt, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, Yeager, & Terenzini, 1997) to toxic (Howard-Hamilton, 2015). Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) has illuminated the ways African American women’s lives cannot be understood by examining race or gender in isolation of their other identities, yet most higher education research about African American students views them as one group. In spite of problematic climates, African American women continually attend HWIs (Miller, 2017) and are broadly successful in higher education (Miles, Jones, Clemons, & Golay, 2011). Yet, little is known about their pathways to success. In this study, I engaged African American undergraduate women’s narratives about their experiences at HWIs toward an understanding of the strategies and networks they access, create, and employ to succeed. In this chapter, I provided the background of African American women’s pathways to higher education, a problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research question, major terms and concepts, conceptual framework, significance of the study, and an overview of the dissertation proposal.

**Historical Foundations of African American Women in Higher Education**

Exploring the historical foundation of higher education and the ways that African American women have experienced these environments provides a deeper understanding of the context for the study. Up until the 19th century, African American women were excluded from participating in higher education because of their race and gender (Thelin, 2003; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003). There were over 250 institutions offering college-level work during the 19th century, but only a few schools accepted African American women students (Evans, 2007). Yet, even when education was withheld from them, African American women in
the United States still valued education (Perkins, 1983; Zamani, 2003) and viewed education as an opportunity to improve the lived experience of their community by acquiring education through other mechanisms (Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Perkins, 1983). African Americans’ postsecondary educational progress is often compared to the historical foundation of the segregated system that promotes White cultural values that were created by and for White middle-and upper-class males (McEwen, Roper, Bryant, Langa, 1990; Mullen, 2010). The underpinnings of higher education have created lasting messages in the environment that signal to African American women who the campus was intended to educate.

Mendoza-Denton et al. (2002) noted that African American students experience “doubts about belonging” at institutions that have historically excluded their participation (p. 897). Their study found that African American students who were particularly sensitive to status-based rejection felt a significantly lower sense of belonging to the university. While literature provides multiple definitions of sense of belonging (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado and Carter, 1997; Museus, Yi, & Saeula, 2017), Strayhorn (2012) argued that “the psychological dimension of belonging refers to feeling valued, needed, and significant within a system or environment” (p. 11). In contemporary times, higher education leaders must question how institutions signal to African American college women that they belong and are valued on the campuses they attend.

**Toxic Racial Campus Environments**

A campus climate is shaped by a shared understanding of ideology, culture, policies, and behaviors of campus community members, including administration, faculty, staff, students, alumni, and the local community (Henry, Fowler, & West, 2011). Campus climate refers to the perceptions of how members in the campus community feel valued, treated, listened to in the
Therefore, creating a Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (Museus, 2014) is critical on a college campus, and higher education institutions carry the responsibility to build positive learning environments for all students within the campus environment (Roksa, Trolian, Pascarella, Kilgo, Blaich, & Wise, 2017). Racial climate issues have existed on college campuses since institutions began implementing racial integration plans (Hurtado, Clayton-Pedersen, Allen, & Milem, 1998). Institutions are responsible for addressing these racial climate issues (Roksa, Trolian, Pascarella, Kilgo, Blaich, & Wise, 2017). Without remedy, experiencing prejudice and discriminatory behaviors negatively affects students’ sense of belonging, persistence, and social engagement (Cabera et al., 1999, Roksa, Trolian, Pascarella, Kilgo, Blaich, & Wise, 2017). My understanding of campus racial climates is informed by literature from the past two decades that describes African American students’ collegiate experiences in efforts to understand their perceptions of campus climate (Allen, 1992; Cabrera et al., 1999; Evans, 2008; Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Patton & Crooms, 2017; Slater, 1994; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Stewart, 2016; Strayhorn, 2010; Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Zamani, 2003). Cabrera et al. (1999) suggested that perceptions of racial discrimination negatively dominate the social experiences of African American students. For example, in 2015 the University of Missouri's African American students shared with administration how they were experiencing racist interactions, feelings of exclusion, and health care issues on campus (Seltzer, 2018). After being ignored by the administration, their grievances resulted in a protest that made national news (Hartocollis, 2017). The perceptions of an environment that does not respect or accept African American students’ identities are not new; rather, they are residuals from a long legacy of an embedded toxic environment. In another example, there has been public discourse in recent years about historical monuments that
represent white supremacy (Parks, 2017). For example, the University of Mississippi had protest on their campus centered on a confederate monument that depicted James Meredith in the center of their campus (Seltzer, 2018). The statue was placed on the campus in 1906 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (Seltzer, 2018), an organization created by Southern White women whose mission was to protect and honor the history of the Confederacy (History of the UDC, 2019). The James Merredith statue created debate of what it symbolized, with one student stating, “This statue is not just stone and metal… It is not just an innocent remembrance of a benign history. This statue celebrates a fictional, sanitized Confederacy” (Seltzer, 2018). Conversely, an alum and historian disagreed with what the statute symbolized. He shared, “The monument is the grave marker for the ‘boys who did not come home’” (Seltzer, 2018). After student led protest, the University administration agreed to relocate the statue to the confederacy grave yard (Seltzer, 2018). Many of the statue commemoration speeches made by individuals exposed the connection between confederate statues and the advancement of white supremacy (Brundage, 2017).

Some groups like the Sons of Confederate Veterans argue that the monuments are a part of U.S. history and those who are protesting to remove these monuments are erasing history (Parks, 2017). Removing the monuments will not correct the racist past of the United States, but institutions that keep these statutes on college campuses communicate directly to African American women and all other racially minoritized students on campus that the institution was not meant for them. Confederate statues were largely built and commemorated during the early 1900s when Jim Crow laws disenfranchised African Americans and this systemic campaign continued into the 20th century by white Democratic-dominated state legislatures after the Reconstruction period (Bartlett, 2009) and then supported afterwards by the Ku Klux Klan's
agenda to control with violence towards African Americans (Skutsch, 2018). African American students’ experiences are forged from the time they step onto a college campus and everything in the environment sends a message to them about who they are in relation to the campus.

More specific to my study are the ways African American women experience HWI campuses as toxic environments (Howard-Hamilton, 2015) that do not accept them as full beings. On HWI campuses, African American women continue to be ‘othered’ as they encounter negative stereotypes (Lewis et al., 2010) and policies (Shapiro et al., 2013) that potentially hinder their persistence and well-being (Lewis et al., 2013, Zamani, 2003). What is a toxic environment? Numerous scholars have posited that hostile climates exist in every organization and the most vulnerable are minoritized individuals, including African Americans (Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Harris-Perry, 2011; Hooks, 1995, 2010; Morelon-Quainoo et al., 2009; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Howard-Hamilton (2015) described a toxic environment as a "stagnant, stifling, and poisonous atmosphere" (p.208) for minoritized individuals. Members belonging to these populations are given access but ignored by oppressors who exert power over them (Howard-Hamilton, 2015).

In a study of Black women, most of whom were undergraduate students attending HWIs located in a Western U.S. state, researchers found that anti-Black microaggressions and misogynoir contributed towards these women’s racial battle fatigue (Corbin, Smith, & Garcia, 2018). The scholars of this study highlighted how culturally constructed images are controlled and portray Black women as the “Angry Black Woman and the Strong Black Woman” (p.632), both portrayals that exacerbate racial battle fatigue for Black women on historically and predominantly white college campuses (Corbin, Smith, & Garcia, 2018). In my study, I am operationalizing “toxic environment” as all of the above - hostile, stifling, oppressive towards
African American women’s identities that includes race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality. A toxic environment communicates frequent reminders that the space is not made for inclusion of their identities but tolerates their presence on campus.

**African American Women Still Persist**

African American women are attending and excelling in college. In 2014, African American women enrolled in higher education at nearly twice the rate of African American men (NCES, 2018). African American women by 2097 will earn all baccalaureate degrees by their race if the current attendance rates persist (Zamani, 2003). Without further investigation, these numbers project the idea that African American women are succeeding and African American men are not, but Cross and Slater (2001) argued scholars cannot lose sight that African American women still are less likely to graduate than White students. Additionally, African American women carry the most debt in race and gender, and have been unable to gain return on investment (AAUW, 2018).

Further, enrollment, retention, and graduation rates are not the only factors that contribute to college success (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). This study will focus on the ways African American women leverage their networks within a toxic environment to persist.

African American women often bring into the college environment preexisting networks (e.g., family, friends, African American centered organizations, faith communities) that they rely on in order to persist while attending historically White colleges (Berkel & Constantine, 2005). Indeed, several scholars have suggested that familial and community capital are central to the success of minoritized students (Beoku-Betts, 2000; Yosso, 2005). An African American woman in one study suggested that cultural capital, receiving family advice, and familial support helped her to succeed (Banks, 2009). African American students often find refuge from
toxic campus environments within their homes (Feagin & Sikes, 1994), an essential network that helps them to gain stability to re-engage a toxic environment once they return to campus (Howard-Hamilton, 2015).

African American women also establish new support networks on campus or in the surrounding community, including other students and faculty (Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Organizations that center African Americans like gospel choirs, campus Black Culture Centers, and Divine Nine sororities provide sustainable support systems, build a stronger sense of belonging, and create an opportunity to adapt to the larger college campus community (Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Empirical studies have reported positive outcomes for African American students’ well-being when the students participated in African American Greek-letter organizations (Pascarella et al., 1996), group counseling for African American college women (Mitchell, 2000), and support networks referred to as “sister circles” (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). These networks are imperative to helping African American women engage in a healthy college experience.

African American college women leverage their multiple networks toward their self Definitions of success. Success in college is often measured by enrollment, retention, and graduation (Renn & Reason, 2012); yet, some scholars have called on more expansive definitions. For example, Banks (2009) found accessing “valued knowledge” was a better predictor than test scores for African American women’s college success (p. 46). There is a gap in the literature that captures African American college women’s success. Therefore, this study will illuminate students’ self-definitions of success.

African American women’s networks and definitions of success may be overlooked or devalued at HWIs. As Freire (2004) explained, “the interests of the oppressors lie in changing
the consciousness of the oppressed not the situation which oppresses them” (p.320). Given that many African American women rely on their friends, family, and other support systems to adjust to life’s circumstances and challenges, it is logical that connections, relationships, and support are key factors to their success and achievement at HWIs (Berkel & Constantine, 2005). My study operationalized the opportunity to explicitly examine the ways networks help shape African American women’s college experiences at HWIs.

Predominantly and historically White higher education institutions have become more accessible than their historical past, but despite increased access, African American women continue to face toxic environments even while contributing to the largest population of students across institutional type (Kim, 2011) and succeeding by traditional measures (Renn & Reason, 2012). Understanding the strategies and networks African American women utilize to anchor them in HWI environments is imperative for higher education leaders and student affairs educators as they pursue goals of inclusion and equity. Monocultural environments promote assimilation (Gusa, 2010) or recognition of difference when it is palatable or beneficial to the institution (Stewart, 2017). As such, this study seeks to inform higher education practice in ways that are multicultural and intersectional. The overarching goal of this narrative study was to improve student affairs practice relative to HWI campus climate for African American women and their success.

**Statement of the Problem**

African American women continue to enroll at historically White institutions to pursue their bachelor’s degrees (Miller, 2017). This group continues to experience exclusion (Zamani, 2003) and hostile environments (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Evans, 2007; Patton & Croom, 2017; Zamani, 2003). Nevertheless, African American women persist and succeed in higher education.
What networks comprise African American women’s ecological systems at historically White institutions? In what ways are these networks connected between and across African American women’s multiple identities?

Studies rarely center African American women. Pitner, Scoot, and DeLoach (2012) argued research that creates a deviant cultural perspective by comparing African Americans to White students without extensive investigation of systemic and micro-level contributions are flawed. Those flaws are evident in the ways studies report findings for African American women and men as a single comprehensive group, compare African American students to White students, and report findings portraying African Americans from a deficit perspective (Pitner, Scott, & DeLoach, 2012).

Despite African American women contributing to the majority of African American students on U.S. college campuses (Aud, Fox, & Kewal Ramani, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2017; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Patton, et al., 2016), higher education scholarship does not adequately examine their unique experiences (Evans, 2007; Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Moses, 1989; Patton & Croom, 2017). A small quantity of literature highlights African American women’s experiences by exploring their encounters with racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression (Evans, 2007; Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Moses, 1989; Patton & Croom, 2017; Wilder, Jones, & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013; Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Rogers, 2012). Demonstrating progress in understanding the lived experiences of African American students on college campuses, Patton & Croom (2017) argued that African American undergraduate women are often ignored, minoritized, and dehumanized by perceptions of discrimination and interactions from White people. Postsecondary institutions should redirect attention to helping undergraduate African American women to address “racism, sexism, classism, and other forms
of oppression” (Patton & Croom, 2017, p. 3) that disrupt their paths to success. How might higher education scholars and practitioners understand African American women’s experiences at HWIs intersectionally? This study will examine the lived experiences of African American undergraduate women in all of their multiple identities in context and how they persist at a HWI.

**Purpose of the Study**

African American women have multiple identities that are either minoritized or majoritized by the systemic forces of their environments. Some scholars have argued that individuals belonging to multiple subordinate groups like African American women are non-prototypical and can experience intersectional invisibility due to their multiple identities (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Individuals may experience positive and negative outcomes of intersectional invisibility. For example, African American women are more likely to be minoritized in the white supremacist, patriarchal society, which is a disadvantage. The experiences of African American women are often examined by researchers from a deficit perspective (Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982). Further, media, government organizations, and institutions perpetuate viewing African American women from a deficit framework (Chrenshaw, 1993, Moses, 1989; Patton & Croom, 2017). These women’s identities are rarely thoroughly examined to understand the complex realities that African American women encounter on historically white campuses (Patton & Croom, 2017, Rogers, 2012; Stewart, 2017). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to engage African American undergraduate women’s narratives about their experiences at HWIs toward an understanding of the strategies and networks they access, create, and employ to succeed. The remainder of this chapter delineates the research questions that guide this study, clarifies the framework undergirding the study, defines important terms and concepts, and explains the significance of the study.
As a scholar, my goal is to inform policy and practice in higher education. I used a critical/feminist approach with my participants to create social and political change resulting in calling for social action (Hatch, 2002).

**Research Questions**

The following questions guided this research study towards engaging African American undergraduate women’s narratives about their experiences at HWIs toward an understanding of the strategies and networks they access, create, and employ to succeed:

1. What does “success” mean to African American college women at HWIs?
2. What strategies and networks of support facilitate African American college women’s success on a historically White college campus?

**Major Terms and Concepts**

This section provides clarification of concepts that are frequently used throughout this dissertation.

*African American Women*- The term African American refers to people who are of African descent from the continent of Africa (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). In the United States, there have been multiple racial labels attach to descendants from Africa (Smith, 1992), a commonality between higher education and the larger society. Between the early 1970s until the late 1980s, "Black" was preferred amongst the majority of Black organizations and often found in surveys (Smith, 1992). However, during a December 1988 National Urban Coalition meeting held in Chicago, the group came to an agreement to replace “Black” with “African American” and launched a campaign supporting the term "African American" (Smith, 1992). African American as a term acknowledges ethnicity (Ebony, 1989), paying homage to ancestral heritage and homeland while simultaneously acknowledging one’s country of citizenship. For purposes of
this dissertation, the term African American women refers to women who self-identify as African American or Black American, and are of African descent, and self-identify as women regardless of biological sex. However, when referencing others’ scholarship, I used the terms used by the author/s in their research.

**Historically White Institutions**- Historically White institutions (HWIs) include colleges and universities that historically were racially segregated. Historically White institutions include public, private, and flagship institutions, as well as schools established by the Morrill Act of 1862, that did not admit African Americans who were born free or became freed after slavery with the establishment of the 13th amendment and later admitted African American women due to governmental policies and legislation. HWIs embody historical and contemporary racialized systemic ideologies that influence the campus climate and culture that favors Whites over other racial groups. HWIs’ racial demographic reflects the institutional historical context in that the majority of students, staff, and faculty are of European decent.

**Minoritized**- The word minoritized signals that it is something that is imposed on others, and goes far beyond being a minority in a majority (Bondi, 2012). People who are minoritized experience mistreatment and prejudices that are forced upon them because of situations outside of their control. For example, African Americans do not choose to be minoritized but due to the social construction of race and White people viewing their own race as superior, African Americans along with other groups who have less power in society are minoritized.

**Race**- A category that is socially constructed (Tatum, 1992; 2001) and used to group people based on their physical characteristics such as skin color. There are few genetic variations among human beings, leaving just solely the human race (Andersen, 2017). Therefore, race is a social construction.
**Racism** - Racism is the idea that one race is more superior than all others and rooted in power (Lorde, 1992). Racism consists of prejudice, stereotypes, and/or discrimination based on the socially constructed concept of race.

**Campus Climate** - A shared understanding of ideology, culture, policies, and behaviors of campus community members, including administration, faculty, staff, students, alumni, and the local community. Campus climate refers to the perceptions of how members in the campus community feel valued, treated, listened to in the environment (Henry, Fowler, & West, 2011).

**Toxic Environment** - The term “toxic environment” describes a hostile, stifling, oppressive environment for African American women’s identities that includes race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality. A toxic environment communicates frequent reminders that the space is not made for inclusion of their identities but tolerates their presence in the environment. A "stagnant, stifling, and poisonous atmosphere" (p.208) for minoritized individuals is a toxic environment and within the environment they are given access but ignored by oppressors, people who exert power over them within the environment (Howard-Hamilton, 2015) and dehumanizes their personhood (Freire, 2004).

**Conceptual Framework**

My conceptual framework was informed by theoretical constructs from ecological systems theory and an intersectional application of a model of multiple dimensions of identity. I drew upon Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009) while exposing how “white supremacy capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 2012, p. 151) shapes societal norms of Black women (hooks, 1996). In seeking to understand the strategies and networks African American undergraduate women at HWIs access, create, and employ to succeed, ecological systems theory helped me examine all levels of African American women’s environments and the relationships that may
overlap or connect within multiple systems. In order to fully understand African American women’s multiple identities in those contexts, the Intersectional Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones, Abes, & Quaye, 2013) provides a structural frame for micro and macro level analyses. Together, ecological systems theory and an intersectional application of multiple dimensions of identity provided an equity-oriented conceptual framework that guided this study. This framework helped me examine African American women’s strategies and networks toward their self-definitions of success relative to their understandings of ecological influences and of their many identities that make up their whole beings. While understanding student-level meaning-making about African American women’s ecological influences, the intersectional lens is necessary to keep the institution and its many systems of oppression in focus, rather than problematizing the students themselves. In this section, I describe the theoretical constructs that comprise my conceptual framework and how I mobilized them together.

**Ecological Systems Theory**

Ecology models explain the processes, but not necessarily the outcomes, of human development. From a holistic student development perspective, ecology helps explain individual differences and multilayered backgrounds (Patton, Renn, Guido, Quaye; 2016). Student affairs professionals can gain an understanding of how undergraduate African American women develop by using ecological models to create a more inclusive campus environment that maximizes their opportunities for growth (Patton et al., 2016). Bronfenbrenner (1995) explained interactionary relationships between people and environments through the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model (Figure 1), the model that I am using to understand the networks of African American undergraduate women as they navigate HWI campuses.
Overlaying African American women’s identities to the PPCT model, proximal processes are reciprocal interactions between African American women and their environments, which “must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time” (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 620). For example, interactions on campus that may involve other people, objects, or symbols within the campus climate can influence African American women’s perceptions and experiences.

Bronfenbrenner (1995) also suggested a person’s perceptions and beliefs will influence their behaviors and development. Context refers to the environment in which one exists, including all levels of Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) model from micro to macro. Time helps to examine the nature of the influence of historical events that one may experience during the pursuit of their degree. For example, time in the ecologies of African American women at HWIs may refer to a political election, change of institutional policy, birth of a child, or death of a family member or friend. Patton et al. (2016) argued that process, person, context, and time create a useful guide for exploring student development by capturing segments of students’ “development-in-progress, or they can serve as a terrain on which to map the locations of development across a number of domains” (p.45). Overall, this theoretical lens provides the structure for investigating participants’ lived experiences as processes in contexts and over time.
Four systems comprise Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1994, 2005) PPCT model: microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems. Each component of the system contributes towards an individual’s ecology. Each part of the system can be viewed as separate, but an ecological approach examines the interactions between the nested systems (Patton et al., 2016). Bronfenbrenner (1994) defined a microsystem as:

a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment. (p.15)

For college students, microsystems could include family, friends, roommates, jobs, and classes, (Renn & Arnold, 2003). For example, families may play a major role for African American women’s development and persistence on a college campus. Renn and Arnold (2003) suggested that family events in a developing young person’s life inform their development. These events may include the birth of sibling(s), divorce, family move, and the timing of attending
postsecondary education (immediately after high school, or continuing at the conclusion of a gap year or years once completing high school). One example of a campus microsystem for an African American woman at a HWI could be White classmates who ask her to share her experience growing up in the ‘hood, implying that she comes from an impoverished neighborhood that they likely saw portrayed on television.

Interactions between microsystems contribute to the mesosystem that influences a person’s development. Bronfenbrenner (1995) defined a mesosystem as:

linkages and processes taking place in two or more settings contributing to developing a person. Particular attention is focused on the synergistic effects created by the interaction of developmentally instigative or inhibitory features and processes present in each setting. (p. 22)

Patton et al. (2016) noted that synergy across systems creates additional opportunities for proximal processes that foster development. These interactions in the mesosystem contribute to campus peer culture (Renn & Arnold, 2003). This system produces various academic, social, and work life resources that can influence students’ identity development (Renn & Arnold, 2003). For example, African American college women may receive microsystem messages from supportive groups on campus defining what it means to be an African American woman while simultaneously receiving other messages on campus from student affairs professionals (another microsystem) that either support or challenge the first microsystem. Another example of interactions between two microsystems is perhaps a student whose aunt is the chair of her community’s NAACP chapter back in her hometown, and the student joins the campus NAACP chapter on her campus during her first-year. Her understanding of the NAACP is informed by the interaction between the two microsystems.
Exosystem forces influence an individual’s experience within an environment and are outside the student’s control (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), providing an opportunity to examine external demands that influence the student’s environment (Patton et al., 2016). Examples of such contexts making up the exosystem of a college student might include institutional policymakers, federal financial aid policies, and the workplace of parents or a spouse (Renn & Arnold, 2003). For example, an African American woman could be influenced by federal immigration policy when she finds out her partner, who is undocumented in the U.S., will be deported to Mexico despite not having ever lived in Mexico.

A student’s micro-, meso-, and exosystems are nested within the macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner (1997) argued macrosystems:

- consist of the overarching pattern of microsystem mesosystem and exosystems characteristic of a given culture subculture, or other extended social structure, with particular reference to the developmentally instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options and patterns of social interchange that are embedded in such overarching systems. (p. 317)

Patton et al. (2016) noted that macrosystems solidify “who attends college and who goes to what college” (p. 45), as well as influence their life course related to economics, job placement, and societal values. Renn and Arnold (2003) highlighted that macrosystems include “meritocratic notions derived from democratic values and capitalist ideology,” and forms “cultural understandings of gender, race, and ethnicity” (p. 273). For example, an African American woman will navigate life differently based on her cultural ideologies, socio-economic status, and race that will render how she responds to political forces that she comes in contact with like elections. An African American woman on a historically white campus cannot control the
messages that mass media communicates to society about what it means to be an African American woman. Police brutality and dehumanization against Black bodies, along with White nationalists marching on University of Virginia campus in Charlottesville with torches, create negative effects for African American women from a macrosystem level.

The outermost layer is the chronosystem, which is comprised of life events that influence students’ development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For many students, the chronosystem is made up of experiences personal to them, such as parental divorce, death, or sexual assault (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For some, the chronosystem marks more society-level experiences, such as the emergence of the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements.

Ecological systems theory will inform my interview protocol, through which I explored questions about how African American women access, create and employ their networks to succeed. Ecological systems theory will help me to make sense of how the different systems are interconnected as they influence the individual; however, ecological systems theory does not account for the complexity of an individual’s multiple identities. Therefore, I am also employing the Intersectional Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones, Abes, 2013) toward a deeper examination of African American women’s identities in context, including their privileged as well as their minoritized identities.

**Intersectional Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity**

The Intersectional Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (I-MMDI; figure 2) is an extension of the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) and demonstrates that both microsystems (relationships with individuals) and macrosystems (larger structural societal influences) are simultaneously influencing students. The MMDI includes a core, the individual’s personal characteristics and attributes such as them being “smart, responsible,” (Jones & Abes,
or displaying leadership attributes. Intersecting social identities (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status) are depicted as the intersecting circles surrounding the core (Jones & Abes, 2013). Depending on what identities are closest to the individual determines where those identities lay in proximity to the core (Jones & Abes, 2013). The ways that an individual makes meaning of experiences is based on their filter that is depicted between the micro and macro systems (Jones & Abes, 2013). This framework allows a comprehensive approach of how individual identities from a micro level interact with systems of oppression from a macro level. Incorporating the concept of intersectionality helps to further understand the levels of multiple dimensions of identity. I suggest that not accounting for African American women’s multiple identities (e.g., race, gender, class, sexual orientation) negates the interactions of those identities. This study will pay close attention to how participants describe how their overlapping identities influence their persistence on historically White college campuses.

Intersectionality was created from acknowledging the ways that battered African American women had to navigate converging systems of oppression that minoritized them based on their multiple dimensions of identity, that contributed largely to racial discrimination experienced in employment and housing markets (Crenshaw, 1991). The scholarship supports that the unique experience of either system of race, gender, and class creates a different experience for women of color to navigate and some may not be able to offer strategies given their different obstacles experienced within their diverse systems (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality has emerged in academia to include other dimensions of identity (Collins, & Blige, 2016; Hancock, 2007, Nash, 2008). For purposes of my study I used intersectionality as defined by Collins and Blige (2016):
Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves (p.11).

Intersectionality also acknowledges how power relations operate and how the theory's historical context is grounded in critical legal studies, feminist legal theory, critical race theory, and critical race feminism (Hancock, 2007).

Figure 2 Intersectional Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones, Abes, & Quaye, 2013)
Together, these theoretical constructs make up the conceptual frame for this study of the strategies and networks African American undergraduate women at HWIs access, create, and employ to succeed. As shown in Figure 3, I am using the IMMDI to center the experiences of African American women within complex ecological systems. I added a level of interconnected blue circles to demonstrate how African American women utilize their networks to mitigate systemic oppression within the toxic environment that is present on their historically White college campuses. I refer to the mitigating action as Ecological Cooling (see Figure 3). When I imagine a toxic environment that is hot, uncomfortable, and hard to breathe in that impedes an African American woman’s wellbeing, I envision the toxic environment as red, which is depicted by the outermost red square. The Ecological Cooling is comprised of networks like families, friends, faculty, administration, staff, sororities, and organizations that help them navigate their college campuses.

Figure 3. Intersectional Model of African American Women’s Multiple Dimensions of Identity in Ecological Context (Adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979, and Jones, Abes, & Quaye, 2013)
Theoretical and Scholarly Significance

Currently, the limited studies of African American undergraduate college women are primarily multi-group or quantitative studies (Mayhew et al., 2016) that provide a narrow examination of the diverse experiences of these women. My study will magnify African American women students’ voices and broaden the literature about their lived experiences on campus. This research can inform institutional equity by shining a light on systemic oppression through intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) that calls for equity at a systems level to address systemic problems. Approaching the study from an ecological lens will contribute to understanding how each level of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory influences a different aspect of these students’ development. Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought grounded my development of the conceptual framework for this study and provided an intersectional lens through which to consider African American women’s multiple identities as they succeed on historically white campuses. Using the Intersectional Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity on its own would not have provided me the opportunity to explore the circles of support that created a buffer between African American women and their campus climates. If I only used an ecological systems framework, I would not have been able to examine the ways African American women make sense of life events, interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. Considering multiple theories when exploring historically marginalized and minoritized populations like African American women is important. This study also contributed to identifying theoretical implications that reinforce the importance of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991).

Also, deconstructing assumptions of African American women within the college environment will provide new perspectives to the narrative that African American women need
little attention or support to succeed. This scholarship can help inform institutional policy created and perpetuated by policy makers. There are existing policies that minoritize, erase, and penalize African American women at HWIs; therefore, policies should create opportunities for African Americans to succeed and address discriminatory practices and climates. Leveraging network capital within the African American community adds value to the unique cultural wealth within this community. This scholarship helped to focus on the power that African American women harness and draw from in order to persist at HWIs. Examining African American women’s integrated identities that include race, class, gender, and other identities will improve understanding of how these students persist on HWI campuses.

**Overview of the Study**

This study explored the ways African American women define success and leverage networks to persist on historically white college campuses. Chapter Two provides a review of the existing literature on race and gender in U.S. higher education, African American women in U.S. higher education, the important role of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, contemporary racial climates at HWIs, counter-spaces, Black Cultural Centers, the potential for student affairs educators to support African American women. Chapter Three describes the methodology I propose to conduct this study of African American women’s experiences. Chapter Four provides an overview of participants, vignettes and findings that emerged from the data. Building on the findings, Chapter Five provides implications for practice, theory, and research.
I will create a culture of unity and inclusivity to allow the growth of one self.

~Halima

CHAPTER II

A Review of the Literature

Student development scholars have long since established that college is a critical time for development of cognition, critical thinking, moral reasoning, psychosocial understanding, and social identities (see Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Mayhew et. al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Patton et al., 2016). Yet, do African American women have full access to the potential benefits of higher education and developmentally-effective experiences? Researchers have unveiled that racial prejudice and racist-related stressors create harm to the wellbeing of Black students (Watkins, LaBarrie, & Appio, 2010) and this population experienced “greater racial-ethnic hostility, greater pressure to conform to stereotypes, less equitable treatment by faculty, staff, and teaching assistants, and more faculty racism” than their peers who are not African American (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). Research on Black women’s experiences at HWIs between 1945 and 1965 suggested issues of racism, accessibility, inclusion, and belonging have existed for decades (Stewart, 2017). Patton and Croom (2017) argued that the gaps in the literature regarding African American undergraduate women create challenges for colleges and universities to maximize opportunities to center and uplift their identities and expand and develop intentional resources to support these women in their development.

This study sought to center the identities and experiences of African American women in ways that can inform HWIs to transform campus environments and equitably support African American women as they persist. Before I pursued this inquiry to understand the strategies and networks African American women at HWIs access, create, and employ to succeed, I had to first
understand the contexts for this study. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to provide an in-depth review of relevant literature that establishes the context. Overall, this chapter explores African American women’s higher education experiences in the U.S., specifically at historically White colleges and universities. In this chapter, I discuss literature about (1) race and gender in U.S. higher education; (2) counter-spaces as sites of reprieve from toxic environments; and (3) the role of student affairs as it relates to supporting African American women.

**Race and Gender in U.S. Higher Education**

In the U.S., education has been a mechanism for people to improve their social status in society (Labaree, 1997), as well as secure safety and economic affluence (Evans, 2008). However, the foundation of the U.S. higher education system is rooted in exclusion of racially minoritized individuals and women of all races (Juárez & Hayes, 2015; Vaccaro, 2017; Karabel, 2005; Thelin, 2011). Watt (2015) noted that “higher education institutions are microcosms of our larger society where systems of oppression are perpetuated and managing difference is often mishandled, resulting in a privileging of the rights of one group over another” (p.12). Higher education as a societal microcosm was true historically, and remains true today. This section discusses race and gender in historical context of U.S. higher education.

**Race in U.S. Higher Education**

Until the 20th century, the U.S. higher education system functioned for those whom the system was created – privileged, White, Christian, young men with financial wealth to help them obtain and sustain intellectual and spiritual capital that would help them secure social mobility (Beadie, 2002; Karabel, 2005; Labaree, 1997; Stewart, 2012; Thelin, 2011). Karabel (2005) described how this chosen population was a preference for admission to Harvard, Yale, and
Princeton over other groups relative to socioeconomic status, religion, gender, and racial privileges during the 20th century.

Thelin (2011) suggested that during the 20th century, the progressive and pragmatist social movements inspired more citizens to pursue higher education (Thelin, 2011). Higher education became viewed as an opportunity for individuals who historically had been socially, politically, and financially disenfranchised in society to empower themselves by pursuing educational pathways to obtain mobility (Anderson, 1988; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Stewart, 2012). As a result of the historical legacy of exclusion, African Americans have experienced overt and covert oppression, including racism (Everett et al., 2010; Hoggard et al., 2012; Hyers, 2007; Johnson, 2017; Patton & Croom, 2017; Sue, 2010) in U.S. higher education.

In contemporary times, “well-intentioned affirmative action diversity advocates inadvertently support majoritarian stories because they do not acknowledge the historical and ongoing racism that shapes the experiences of students of color” (Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004, p. 7-8). Bakke v. Regents of the University of California signaled to higher education the persistence of racism when efforts are being made by individuals to eliminate “the single policy in education that aims to account for race” (Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004, p.1). Other cases, including Gratz v. Bollinger in 2003 and Fisher v. the University of Texas in 2016, involved plaintiffs who were denied admission at selective campuses and argued that race should not be considered during the admissions process. These cases suggest that those who do not benefit from acknowledging race, namely White people, ignore the racial realities of communities of color. Further, “opponents of affirmative action claim that accounting for race in higher education discriminates against Whites” (Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004, p.1). Meanwhile, African Americans, along with other racially minoritized students, could
suffer the consequences with a racist systemic approach of race-neutrality embedded in meritocracy (Yosso et al., 2004).

**Gender in U.S. Higher Education**

White women helped create pressure for institutions to accept women when they began to participate in the Women’s Rights Movement in 1848 (History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives, 2018). However, despite the movement gaining popularity throughout the 19th century, African American women still encountered racism even from White suffragists (Terborg-Penn, 1998). Black suffragists reminded White women to not overlook the “political rights of the less fortunate” (Terborg-Penn, 1998, p. 70) and Black suffragists had to continue their own agendas due to the exclusion they faced from White suffragists.

Many institutions of higher education experienced low enrollment due to causalities of the Civil War, and colleges that excluded women struggled to survive; therefore, many colleges began accepting women, albeit White women, to protect their institutions’ financial health (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2018). The transition to coeducation was gradual, though. Colleges and universities started to admit women and African Americans in small numbers, but the institutional norms and policies did not reflect this change (Thelin, 2011).

**African American women in U.S. higher education.**

Even after African American women were admitted to HWIs, there was evidence that the system of higher education in the U.S. was not created to educate African American women or other minoritized groups (Evans, 2007; Karabel, 2005). For example, although Oberlin College was one of the first higher education institutions to extend admission to women and African Americans, Oberlin’s policies compelled women to clean men’s laundry and serve food in the dining hall while African Americans were not allowed to live on campus (Thelin, 2011). This
was common for HWIs to exclude African Americans from living on campus with the rest of their peers. Evans (2007) noted that “black women students did not have access to campus housing. Their inability to secure such basic needs as food, clothing, and shelter often constituted part of their college experiences” (p. 106). For example, African American women at the University of Iowa were not permitted to live on campus until the mid-20th century, and systemic racism made it challenging to secure off-campus housing (Breaux, 2010).

Not having the opportunity to live on campus created a different experience that did not render all of the social benefits that their peers who lived on campus obtained (University Memory Book, 1923). However, African American women attending the University of Iowa did not allow the institutional discrimination and systemic racism to hinder their opportunity to attend college (Iowa Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, 1929; Breaux, 2010) and found ways to persist. For example, utilizing their social and political agency within the African American community, these African American women worked together to create their college social environment by securing off-campus housing together and forming a community to contend with the racism (Evans, 2007) in their own counter-space. Ultimately, the institutional policy banning African American women full access to their educational environment by living on campus influenced their social networks. Evans (2007) noted African American women's many experiences with prejudice and demeaning attitudes from students, faculty, and administrators extended beyond the classroom. She summarized, "they were conspicuously invisible: shunned, ignored, treated as exotic, or silently despised" (Evans, 2007, p. 104). In the face of adversity, African American women forged forward to pursue their own experience in an environment that constantly tried to reduce their freedoms.
Pursuing their own educational experiences was not new for African American women. During the 17th century through the 19th century, formal educational attainment for Black women depended on their legal, social, and economic status (Evans, 2007). Due to their race, they were subject to legal consequences, but some “willfully broke the law and conducted their own formal or informal learning despite the ever-looming threat of violent repercussions” (Evans, 2007, p.27). African American women have pursued formal and informal education for racial uplift, demonstrating African American women’s self-assigned social responsibility towards the African American community (Evans, 2007; Slevin, 2005; Slevin & Wingrove, 1998; Collins, 1990; Giddings, 1984; Stack, 1974), despite their historical systemic exclusion from secondary education (Evans, 2007) and post-secondary education (Evans, 2007; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Thelin, 2003; Thomas & Jackson, 2007; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003).

Barriers to accessing formal, public education did not stop African American women from obtaining and providing education on their own. Black women opened schools to educate their Black communities by the 19th century in the North and South of the United States (Evans, 2007). School for African American women was an opportunity to acquire higher education for racial uplift, an effort to improve the lived experience of African Americans (Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Payton, 1985; Perkins, 1983). Obtaining education was to help the entire African American community and not just the individual earning the degree (Perkins, 1983; Evans, 2007). African American women in the United States still valued education even when education was not easily accessible (Payton, 1985; Perkins, 1983; Zamani, 2003).

During the 19th century, at the beginning of the Civil War, over 250 institutions were offering college-level work, but only seven schools accepted African American women as students (Evans, 2007). Those institutions included a private liberal arts college, Oberlin, a
private Christian college, Antioch, a private and conservative Christian college, Hillsdale in Michigan, the first racially integrated coeducational liberal arts college in the Southern United States, Berea College, and three historically Black institutions, Wilberforce located in Ohio, Cheyney University and Lincoln University, both located in Pennsylvania (Evans, 2007). In 1850, Lucy Stanton earned a degree in literacy from Oberlin college, making her the first African American woman to earn a U.S. college degree (Evans, 2007). Women were still not allowed to earn bachelor’s degrees during this time period (Evans, 2007).

African American women persisted with educational aspirations despite barriers during this time in the United States. Following in Lucy Stanton’s footsteps, twelve years later in 1862 at Oberlin College, two years prior to slavery being abolished, Mary Jane Patterson became the first African American woman to earn a bachelor’s degree in the United States (Littlefield, 1997). Shortly thereafter, slavery was abolished, but racism was still rampant throughout the United States. President Lincoln acknowledged in a public statement that slavery was “the greatest wrong ever inflicted on any people,” but stopped short of condemning racism. He went on to say, “Even when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race... It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated” (Foner, 2018, p. 6-7). The residual influence of slavery established White people to advance with educational opportunities and African American to obtain education separate from that of Whites.

**The Important Role of Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

Since the inception of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), these institutions continue to fulfill a significant role in the U.S. higher education system and create welcoming learning environments for African American students to persist and excel (Evans, 2007; Zamani, 2003). These institutions were often the only opportunity for African Americans
to pursue higher education before HWIs relented to pressures to admit other populations to their institutions (Evans, 2007; Zamani, 2003). Since the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling that allowed African American students to attend public historically White schools, attendance at HBCUs declined as access to HWIs became available (Gurin & Epps, 1975; Fleming, 1983). Specific to higher education, *Bakke v. Regents of the University of California* (1978) was a landmark decision where the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in favor of allowing race to be one of several factors considered in college admission policies as an attempt to combat racial discrimination (Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, & Lynn, 2004).

Scholars suggested that African American students wanting to stay closer to their communities and institutional financial support provided by White institutions influenced them to select White higher education institutions (Gurin & Epps, 1975). These two benefits did not come without challenges for African American students once they arrived on historically White campuses. During the twenty-first century, HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions’ campus environments have been more welcoming for Students of Color compared to HWIs (Brown and Davis, 2001; Hurtado, Milem, & Clayton-Pedersen, 1999; Zamani, 2003). However, African American college women continue to pursue baccalaureate degrees at HWIs in high numbers. For instance, Pew Research Center (2017) reported only 8.5% of African American college attendees enrolled in HBCUs in 2015, reflecting a decline from 13.1% in 2000, indicating that the majority of African American students likely attend HWIs across the nation.

**Contemporary Racial Climates at HWIs**

As referenced earlier, historically white institutions initially excluded African American women. The system of higher education was created by white people, therefore, establishing,
perpetuating, and reinforcing white supremacy. The system of white supremacy influences the experiences of African American women at these campuses. In bell hooks’ (1995) essay, “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life,” she explained how African Americans can reclaim their power by using the photographer as a tool for sharing a counter-narrative of how African American people live in their unadulterated truths without concern of spectators. She said:

Reflecting the way black folks looked at themselves in those private spaces, where those ways of looking were not being overseen by a white colonizing eye, a white supremacist gaze, these images created ruptures in our experience of the visual. They challenged both white perceptions of blackness and that realm of black-produced image making that reflected internalized racism. (p. 61)

hooks’ (1995) words demonstrate how a white supremacist gaze is an intrusion of “black folks,” including how Black people view themselves and white people’s perceptions of what “blackness” entails. hooks’ (1995) definition of white supremacist gaze connects to the experiences of some of the participants in this study. Some participants shared experiences that demonstrated their awareness of outside influences that monitored or prescribed their racial being while ignoring their other identities. For example, participants shared examples when others caution them to "turn down [their]Blackness," while some self-monitored themselves, or wanted to represent their race in the best light because they were the only example on which white people could reflect their understanding of blackness. Being conscious of the presence of white people spectating contributes towards the awareness of the white supremacist gaze and African American women may internalize it to a degree. For some it may influence their behaviors, resulting in performativity, resistance for survival, or liberation.
Even after they were able to attend historically White institutions, African American women still did not receive the same social rights as their White peers. African American women reported experiences of hostile racial/ethnic campus climates in higher education that can negatively influence their educational outcomes (Evans, 2007; Hayes, Chun-Kennedy, Edens, & Locke, 2011; Patton & Croom, 2017; Rogers, 2012). Research supports that negative campus climate complicates students’ racial identity development. Scholars described that racial-related stressors within a campus climate have a negative influence on African American students’ psychological well-being (Hayes, Chun-Kennedy, Edens, & Locke, 2011). One study found that the environment was often toxic to African American women’s race, gender, and other marginalized identities (Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2011). Another study reported that African American women were often invisible, excluded, and left to navigate the social and academic journey alone (Patton & Croom, 2017). Additionally, many students found a lack of support from faculty, administration, and other racial/ethnic peers once they were accepted at their respective institutions, which left some students to navigate the environment by themselves (Patton & Croom, 2017). Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso’s (2000) scholarship highlighted the use of microaggressions against African American students within the classroom and outside of the classroom and the negative effects that these microaggressions create on the campus racial climate. Students described racial microaggressions as feelings of invisibility or isolation, being stereotyped, having negative interactions with faculty, and self-doubt in the classroom (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). During the 19th century, white people perpetuated negative stereotypes depicting caricatures of African American people (Bartlett, 2009) by characterizing African American people as comedic or violent (Lensmire, 2017) which was a systemic tool to demean African American people. In contemporary times blackface continues to be an offensive
and defaming practice (Bartlett, 2009). This disrespectful tradition dates back to 1830s and continues on college campuses across the United States (Fausset and Robertson, 2019). For example, during the spring semester of 2018 at California Polytechnic State University after the popular movie, “Black Panther,” was in theaters, one white man student posted an image of himself in blackface with the caption, “I hope this offends someone” (Brantley, 2019). Another example includes two white women students at the University of Oklahoma in spring 2019, one woman filmed the other women as she wore blackface and said, “I am a nigger” (McLaughlin, 2019). Blackface demoralizes, and the defames African American people’s racial identity and creates a social norm to see them only as a racial stereotype which is another example of white supremacist gaze.

Outside the classroom, African American students experienced racial microaggressions as feelings of rejection, not wanted, feeling racial tension, and uncomfortable (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). In addition, researchers and scholars have argued that many African American women experience imposter syndrome during their collegiate careers (Bernard, et. al. 2017); imposter syndrome is a term describing high achieving individuals who internalize that their intellectual abilities are fraudulent (Clance & Imes, 1978). Despite these negative experiences, Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso (2000) suggested that African American students try to succeed academically while navigating tension from microaggressions that stem from racial stereotypes. Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma (2003) found similar results in their study of campus racism. Fifty-one Black students (24 Black men and 27 Black women) attending a HWI recorded their daily experiences of racism in a diary for two weeks (Swim et. al., 2003). Sixty-five percent of participants experienced a prejudiced incident (Swim et al., 2003). Banks (2009) described African American women undergraduates as “raced, classed, and gendered beings,
holding intersecting social locations that render them powerless in many settings and limit their power in others” (p.141). The interactions in the campus environment that undergraduate African American women encounter outside of the classroom on their campuses can either oppress them due to their multiple identities or bolster their own belief in their abilities.

African American women develop resistant strategies to mitigate their environments. Resistance demonstrates strength when encountering adversity that hinders identity development. Scholarship informs that the type of resistance can be beneficial or harmful to the development of African American women (Robinson and Ward, 1991; Watt, 2003). Healthy identity development for African American women involves resistance strategies (Robinson and Ward, 1991) which focus on liberation and empowerment instead of a survival approach to resistance (Robinson and Howard-Hamilton, 1994). Resistance for survival allows for the internalization of negative messaging that erodes African American women’s identities (Robinson and Ward, 1991). Resistance for liberation, however, builds on African American women's self-esteem. This alternative to resistance for survival allows for African American women to empower themselves from their historical and cultural wealth (Robinson and Howard Hamilton, 1994). Watt (2003) described resistance for liberation through the example of African American college women making a “conscious decision to build a network of African American friends and in the community and even those outside of her race who will send messages to her that counter the negative ones she receives daily from her surroundings” (Watt, 2003, p.32). African American women historically have relied on their religious and spiritual connections to manage the campus climates where they pursued their education (Brown and Gray, 1991; Mattis, 2002; Patton and McClure, 2009). Religion and spiritually have been used as a "psychological resistance strategy" (Watt, 2003, p. 30) and not just a way for African
American women to cope with the negative systemic messages (Robinson and Ward, 1991). The present study seeks to inform implications that will help African American undergraduate women develop with resistance.

The discussion of this research presents opportunities for institutions to respond to systemic barriers by creating and preserving practices that empower African American women on college campuses, and ensuring that African American women’s transitions into campus environments are smooth. African American women have to navigate their race, gender, socio-economic and class status as well (Patton & Croom, 2017). The campus climate can produce further stressors or reduce the turbulence of the transition for these students.

**Counter-spaces**

In this section, I discuss the ways campus counter-spaces are physical and metaphorical sites of support for African American women on HWI campuses. Counter-spaces offset negative effects that a campus climate imposes on African American students. Some institutions create or support initiatives (e.g., women’s centers, cultural houses, programming, living-learning communities) to provide opportunities for these students to build support mechanisms or extend their communities (Blackwell, 2010; Carter, 2007; Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017; Tatum, 1997; University of Iowa (n.d.); Wolfe, 2017). These physical spaces provide students outlets to affirm their identities (Jones & Abes, 2013).

Counter-spaces provide positive outcomes for African American women to build knowledge and celebrate their culture and identities (Blackwell, 2010; Carter, 2007; Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017; Patton & Croom, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000; Strange & Banning, 2001; Tatum, 1997; Wolfe, 2017; Yosso et.al., 2009). Blackwell (2010) argued that these spaces promote interaction with peers that lead to positive identity development and a sense of
self. Scholars examining sense of belonging literature have found that campus counter-space initiatives have positive outcomes on African American women students’ development (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2012; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn (2012) expanded on the benefits of a sense of belonging for students including increased psychological well-being and academic achievement. However, culture centers and other counter-spaces continue to be under-resourced across the country, which has a direct influence on African American women’s college experience (Hefner, 2002).

Counter-spaces are not all physical buildings or physical environments; some counter-spaces are metaphorical. These types of counter-spaces are typically created by and for African American students (Solórzano et al., 2000) and for African American women include Black student organizations, Black sororities, peer groups, and other organizations. Counter-spaces on historically White campuses can be informal or formal for African American college women.

**Black Cultural Centers**

Black cultural centers were known as a place for African American students to find refuge from the world’s racial hostile environment, (Patton, 2006) and meeting place for social and political protest on college campuses during earlier years (Hefner, 2002; Stovall, 2005). The Black Student Movement of the 1960s helped establish Black cultural centers on historically white campuses (Patton, 2006). Black cultural centers created a continuous reminder to celebrate Black pride and community support and described as a fortress to counter the marginalizing experience on White campuses (Hefner, 2002). Counter-spaces for other student communities of color were designed using Black Cultural Centers as a model (Hefner, 2002).

Contemporary discussions in literature reveal a debate about the need for Black cultural centers on campuses (Case, 2014; Hefner, 2002; Patton, 2006; Princes, 2002). Some scholars
argue a concern over budgetary constraints (Bankole, 2005; Hefner, 2002; Malveaux, 2005), while others argued the need for them has diminished because we lived in a “post-racial” society during the early 2000’s (Hefner, 2002). Other scholars argued that Black cultural centers should be converted into multicultural centers that will facilitate the needs of multiple minoritized students (Patton, 2006). However, despite the lack of empirical research suggesting that these centers are positive contributors towards African American students’ well-being, there is evidence that suggests Black cultural centers still address a need for African Americans to have a counter-space from a toxic campus climate on these campuses (Case, 2014). Solórzano, et al. (2000) suggested counter-spaces help students respond to racial microaggressions. They described counter-spaces as an outlet for racism and prejudice where it can be challenged and students’ racial identities can be supported (Solórzano, et al., 2000). This counter-space has the potential to promote “psychological wellbeing and academic persistence among those at risk for experiencing the debilitating effects of an adverse institutional climate (Case, 2014, p. 14). Black cultural centers continue to be scrutinized about the value they bring to HWIs. These centers’ legitimacy continues to be questioned despite the need to serve the increasingly racially diverse population that includes African American women (Hefner, 2002). During the twenty-first century, these counter-spaces continue to provide safe spaces and support that help to recruit and retain the students they are intended to serve (Hefner, 2002; Patton, 2016). However, these centers continue to lack funding and resources, including staffing to support African American women (Hefner, 2002). Black Cultural Centers have proven to be safe spaces that uplift African American women on historically White campuses, however, this counter-space continues to be contested, and funding threatened. African American women can benefit from physical and metaphorical counter-spaces like Black Cultural Centers on their college campuses.
The Potential for Student Affairs Educators to Support African American Women

As referenced in chapter one my goal is to improve policy and practice in higher education. In this section, I discussed the underpinnings of student affairs practice from a theoretical perspective and the importance of fostering a positive environment, then suggest ways student affairs professionals can reevaluate their delivery of services to African American women, and finally discuss how intersectional identities that African American women possess calls for student affairs professionals to center their lived experiences. Nuss (2003) explained that two main principles of student affairs have persisted despite continuous social, political, economic, and religious changes relative to U.S. higher education. The first principle is to develop the whole person. The second objective was intended to advance the academic mission of the institution (Nuss, 2003). The most commonly used theories in student development are grounded in psychology that helps to understand the complexities of identity (Jones & Abes, 2013). However, most of the theories that are readily used in higher education stem from a White male perspective and do not accommodate African American women specifically (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Stewart, 2016; Patton & Croom, 2017). The overuse of these theories creates a drawback to developing a culturally competent workforce in student affairs to address the myriad needs of African American women.

Student affairs scholars are actively exploring new theories and extending existing models to address the needs of African American women students in what Jones and Stewart (2016) refer to as the “third wave” of student development theory. “Third wave” student development challenges inequitable structural and systemic oppression that privileges White values (Jones & Stewart, 2016) over minoritized groups such as African American women on historically White campuses. A course curriculum that ignores counterstories while uplifting a
single narrative of White supremacy embodies structural and systemic oppression. Policies that benefit individuals based on inherited privileged identities that exclude African American women and other minoritized groups from full campus citizenship that embrace and extend opportunities to White students who privileged identities creates access and freedom to engage without penalty or permission in the campus climate manifests structural and systemic oppression.

Understanding and implementing characteristics of a positive environment is vital. Scholars’ findings suggest that a strong indicator of college success is student perceptions of institutional support and the ways students’ needs are addressed (Allen, 1992; Jackson, 2011). Rosales & Person (2003) explained that African American women students’ experiences and perceptions should inform student affairs professional practices. These scholars also argued that regardless of institutional type, institutions are responsible for supporting the needs of the "ever-changing needs of black women students" (p.54). Hurtado et al. (1998) suggested a positive college environment includes four factors: (a) an inclusive environment for students, faculty, and administrators of color; (b) a curriculum that acknowledges historical and contemporary experiences of people of color; (c) programming that create opportunities to recruit, retain, and persist students of color; and (d) an institutional mission that fosters the commitment to diversity and inclusion. Their scholarship suggests that toxic college climates are unlikely to uphold these principles in practice. Creating an inclusive campus will allow student affairs professionals to take the lead in ensuring safety and inclusion for all students, including African American college women students.

The following strategies could help student affairs educators to strengthen their cultural consciousness: (1) critical personal development (Watt, 2007, 2013, 2015), (2) student
engagement (Barnhardt, 2015; Howe & Strauss, 2009; Lowery & Dannells, 2004), and then applying theory into practice (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Johnson, 2017; Stewart, 2016; Patton & Croom, 2017). First, critical personal development starts by focusing on one's privileged identities and reactions to difference. For example, understanding one's privileged identities is helpful for navigating space at HWIs as student affairs professionals (Watt, 2015). Knowing and addressing one’s defenses is paramount when engaging with difference and utilizing the privileged identity exploration model to address individuals’ defenses when interacting with dissonance-provoking stimulus is helpful (Watt, 2007, Watt, 2015). Becoming a conscious scholar practitioner will help prepare individuals to address oppressive influences within the college environment. Watt (2015) suggested “conscious scholar practitioners are committed to reflecting and assessing the impact of their work, grounding their work in research and theory, and engaging in active exchanges to learn within communities of practice and scholarship” and help to dismantle systemic oppression (p.32). Watt (2013) noted that student affairs professionals make better decisions when "intentional effort is given to balancing the head, heart, and the hands when engaging in Difference," urging this process to take place inside and outside of the classroom by implementing intentional programming, and policies(p.14).

Student affairs professionals have to make an intentional effort to adopt reflective thinking and practices. Student affairs professionals working in higher education must reevaluate the services they provide and how they are delivered (Woodward, Love, & Komives, 2000; Rosales & Person, 2003). The most common programs and services aimed to assist African American women are under these areas: "women's centers, multicultural centers, counseling and health services, cultural programs, student activities, and educational equity—academic support programs" (Rosales & Person, 2003, p. 61). Through these six areas, services
are provided to address women's health issues, violence against women, support groups to help cope with alienation, and celebrating women's academic success (Mitchell, 2000; Rosales & Person, 2003). Even with these areas, institutions are not adequately prepared to create environments truly inclusive of African American women; rather, these areas are responses to toxic environments. Further, providing limited resources and support reinforces how African Americans are valued or devalued (Rosales & Person, 2003). Finding opportunities on campus to enhance student affairs professionals’ personal development by participating in workshops, presentations, or trainings will help them to be reflective about their privileged identities. Building authentic relationships with African American college women and participating in student programs or interacting with them in their counter-spaces if and when invited could facilitate relationship-building.

Secondly, HWIs should create environments to develop students to engage in the campus climate. For example, Barnhardt (2015) explained that institutions should be spaces that provide students opportunities to exercise being involved in their institutional climate and holding their institutions accountable in creating inclusive, moral, and just environments. Engaging and empowering students is an important part of transforming these environments. Howe and Strauss (2009) urged student affairs professionals to utilize students on campus to reshape the college environment. They suggested that student governments will take on new roles to ensure campus citizenship amongst all students. Another approach is to enforce restorative justice, an approach to repair harm that may stem from a student’s discriminatory behaviors (Lowery and Dannells, 2004). Research from the National Survey on Student Engagement recommends High-Impact Practices (HIPs; e.g., learning communities, research with faculty, senior capstone) as opportunities for engagement on campus. The above strategies provide an outline for institutions
to engage students to create more inclusive campus climates in which African American women can actively participate and see the benefits these engagement opportunities award.

Finally, student affairs professionals are often prepared with narrow interpretations of college student development theories to inform their practice on college campuses (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Johnson, 2017; Stewart, 2016; Patton & Croom, 2017). Patitu & Hinton (2003) explained that HWIs have not been successful in recruiting and retaining African American men or women faculty. African American faculty, alumni, and professionals were deemed necessary to helping support African American women through mentorships that contribute towards retention and persistence (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Munford, 1996; Rosales & Person, 2003). These scholars highlighted participation of African American faculty and administrators on HWI campuses are crucial and can create positive outcomes for students (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Mainly, African American women students benefit from having a mentor whose identities are the same or similar to their own (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). These minoritized groups also inform and develop policies to create more inclusive environments within HWIs (Bastedo, 2012).

Student affairs professionals must continue to extend their comfort zones. bell hooks (2010) introduced the idea of radical openness, which encourages individuals to become vulnerable and step out of their comfort zones toward deep learning. A strategy shared by Linley (2017) provided practical methods to improve the classroom environment for students by creating brave spaces the first day of class, to create space for dominant identities to coexist with non-dominant identities in dialogue by identifying privilege identities. For example, a student belonging to a dominant group (e.g., White man) names their racial and gender privilege and how those privileged identities might influence the student’s perspectives in the class. Another student belonging to a non-dominant group (e.g., African American woman) names being a
person of able body and perhaps socioeconomic privilege. This idea can be extended outside of
the classroom setting and adopted by student affairs professionals to incorporate in meetings
with students from diverse backgrounds, programming, and practice amongst colleagues to role
model good practices.

Centering African American college women's voices helps to create space for counter-
histories and counter-stories to exist (Jones & Abes, 2013). Student affairs professionals
centering African American women's experiences in higher education requires re-imagining
"programs, policies, organizational structures, rituals, and routines from the perspective of
students from racially marginalized groups" (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 144). Rosales and Person
(2003) described African American women as nurturers of their communities that transcends to
the college environment. They further articulated that this group “tend to value community,
group cohesiveness, group socioeconomic mobility, and a commitment to uplifting others”
(Rosales & Person, 2003, p. 55). Based on their desires to create change in these ways it
provides a building block for student affairs professionals to uniquely support African American
women by supporting their “academic, social, cultural, economic, career, interpersonal, and
intrapersonal needs” (Rosales & Person, 2003, p. 55). Sandeen (2001) explained that student
affairs professionals can meet the needs of minoritized students by actively including them in the
organization and “engage in regular assessment so that they can understand and adapt to the
inevitable changes that occur” (p. 190). Creating physical and psychological space for African
American women on college campuses is beneficial to their development and can help them
succeed.
Chapter Summary

This chapter establishes the need for scholarship to center African American undergraduate women (Patton & Croom, 2017). The United States’ historical treatment and exclusion of African American women due to their multiple minoritized identities, such as race and gender created historical and contemporary implications for them at HWIs (Juárez & Hayes, 2015; Vaccaro, 2017; Karabel, 2005; Thelin, 2011; Watt, 2015). African American women encounter microaggressions and macroaggressions in the campus climate (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000) due to the privileging of other racial, gender, and socioeconomic identities over their own during the establishment of the system of higher education (Beadie, 2002; Karabel, 2005; Labaree, 1997; Stewart, 2012; Thelin, 2011). During contemporary times, African American undergraduate women continue to encounter toxic campus climates despite gaining access to HWIs (Kim, 2011). In spite of oppression within HWI campus climates (Evans, 2008; Patton & Croom, 2017; Zamani, 2003), African American women continue to obtain education degrees from these institutions (Miller, 2017). African American women create counter-spaces on HWI campuses to find refuge (Patton, 2006), support, and affirm their identities (Blackwell, 2010; Carter, 2007; Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017; Patton & Croom, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000; Strange & Banning, 2001; Tatum, 1997; Wolfe, 2017; Yosso et.al., 2009). There are still opportunities for student affairs professionals to develop sustainable and intentional institutional change that will nurture African American undergraduate women while they persist at HWIs. Further research that seeks to understand the strategies and networks African American women at HWIs access, create, and employ to succeed, may help HWIs more effectively support their success.
Chapter three outlines the methodology I used to understand the strategies and networks African American undergraduate women at HWIs accessed, created, and employed to succeed. First, I discuss my positionality to provide the reader a better understanding of how my identities and experiences influenced the ways I approached and interpreted this research. Next, I discuss the paradigm that influenced my approach to this study. Third, I describe the methods, including sample, data collection, and data analysis.

**Researcher Positionality & Reflexivity**

As I reflected on my own lived experiences as an African American woman undergraduate student, graduate student, and college administrator, I recognized the visible and invisible influences of a system that often ignored or alienated my identities. I experienced and observed behaviors from individuals within the college environment that perpetuated systemic oppression through overt and covert mechanisms in these white spaces known as academia. I lived with the consequences of the United States’ past aggressions towards people who were mistreated due to their identities. These consequences became compounded when we elected our first African American president, Barack Hussein Obama II, the nation’s 44th president, which exposed individuals who hold ideologies and perceptions of racism that still existed in a supposed “post-racial society” (Andersen, 2017). The election of our 45th president, Donald J. Trump, exposed more individuals who hold onto the United States’ racist past while creating further violence for and against minoritized individuals. For example, the heightened police brutality that members of our nation witness from coast to coast (Andersen, 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2017) demonstrates that some Americans are accepted to live free without presenting a threat to
society while others like African Americans are targeted. Being an African American in a place that ignores the American part of your existence is violent, oppressive, and creates implications for the individuals forced to carry this burden while still pursuing the “American Dream” - life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. How does a person exist in an environment that often does not accept them fully and frequently excludes them until the dominant group, such as Whites in power finds a use for them?

Living in predominantly White neighborhoods, White spaces were not unfamiliar to me. We built friendships with our neighbors in every neighborhood that we lived. My earliest memories of neighbors are from around age three, I remember eating spaghetti dinner every week at a White family’s house when we lived in Ohio. Our White neighbors directly next door befriended my parents and we spent time between both houses. Interactions between my parents and these neighbors brought up diverging race differences in dialogues about how my parents did things differently than them. For example, my dad decided to build us a sand box, and when he started our neighbors asked what he was building because it had a roof. He explained he was building the roof to keep the sun off his babies. Many of our White neighbors would put sunblock on their kids, but my family protected our rich melanin skin tone, keeping us out of extended sun exposure.

My family also built a great relationship with our White neighbors in Pennsylvania who lived directly next door. In fact, I kept in touch with Mrs. Twitchel in my adult life until she passed away. Two other White families in the block behind us had children around my brother’s and my age. On one end of that block was the Julius family and the other was the Gross family. As kids, my brother and I would interact with both families regularly, and my brother and I both babysat for one family. Later, I started babysitting for the young families in my neighborhood as
a preteen. Although my brother and I would be invited to join a family at the country club to swim or to celebrate birthdays, no family in that neighborhood ever invited my family over for dinner or likewise.

Despite growing up in White neighborhoods, my brother and I attended a multicultural public school for the majority of our lives. My parents put a pool in our backyard as kids, so our house became a popular hangout. Our multicultural group of friends from school came to visit, and our White neighborhood friends would come over, too; it was like two distinct spheres fusing. As an adult now, I am aware of the critical life lessons learned about the differences in how most of our friends grew up, our neighbors, and my brother and I. For example, I remember one family in our neighborhood who always bought their kids two of everything, such as Nintendo gaming systems, so each child could have their own. Our school friends were raised more like my brother and me; if we were blessed to get a game set, we shared one. Moving to Indiana, we built strong relationships with our White neighbors there as well. Mr. and Mrs. Galema lived across the street from us and became family. We looked out for each other and invited each other to celebrations.

Growing up as an African American woman in a working-class household with parents who promoted education, college was always a goal to be obtained. In fourth grade, the school asked my parents to have my cognitive abilities tested. After completing the tests, I was placed in a class where we worked at a faster pace than my current grade, and I remained on that track for the rest of my secondary education. After taking the tests, I noticed a change in my learning environment, there was less racial diversity than before and more educational resources; our class spent more time on research projects, presentations, access to computers, and more field trips than I had prior.
I watched the demographics continue to change as I transitioned into high school. The most vulnerable minoritized students were left with curricula that did not prepare them for college, while students like myself had better opportunities and curricula to pursue college as an option. Reflecting on this experience in later years, I learned that this was an example of cultural capital being distributed to some and not all students. I was often one of the only African American students in my class with the majority being White students. The experience in the classroom was often isolating, especially when I was asked by classmates and teachers to explain about Black History Month or anything related to being African American in the United States.

Early on I realized that the dominant White culture viewed African Americans as monolithic. I learned at a young age that experiences of African Americans were not the same. Attending a public school where the social class was diverse helped me to develop a well-rounded understanding that everyone does not come from the same environments. I had African American friends who lived in government assisted housing, apartments, and single family houses. Our lived experiences varied on parental style of upbringing, religion, socio-economic background, and other factors.

Despite my awareness of diversity among African Americans, I developed assumptions at a young age that White people’s experiences were monolithic. For example, I thought that all White people were wealthy, which was informed and reinforced by images from the media and shows on television. As I grew older, I learned all White people were not wealthy and some White people lived in poverty. I also discovered that some White people who I knew at an early age could hide behind the pretense that they were wealthy when they were struggling from paycheck to paycheck. For example, some White students lived in impoverished neighborhoods but at first glance most people would not come this conclusion and instead make the assumption
that a Black student who lived in a more affluent neighborhood would have the same lived experience.

During my junior year in high school, I moved across country to the heartland of the United States, Indiana. I became one out of only five African Americans in a building that held sixth to twelfth grade. Out of the five, two were siblings, it was a different world of isolation. I was always close to my family but our relationship grew even stronger because at school I was alone and constantly challenged with feeling like the outsider - not just because of race, but my new peers had been together since elementary school. Back home in Pennsylvania, I had a long-standing relationship with my peers who were racially, ethnically, and economically different than me. They knew who I was beyond my categorizations of identities. In my new environment, it took time for my peers to look beyond the categories of my identities and see me. During my first year in a new state, city, and school, I was asked by a White girl who befriended me, what it was like to live in the ghetto. Media influenced her views on what it meant to be African American. I often would hear, “You speak well,” or “You are different than other people I know like you.” These statements were formed from White students’ upbringing and exposure of images and soundbites which influenced their interactions with me, an African American girl. This challenged my prior understanding of what it meant to live in harmony with difference. Racial bias did not present itself in the same way in my previous school, but in my new school the mask was off and race came up more frequently, as did social class. A large population of students came from wealthy families and although I was happy with my Honda Accord, it was five years older than most kid’s luxury vehicles. In my previous school, I was privileged to have a car at sixteen. At my new school, privilege meant something entirely different. For example, one day as two of my friends and I were leaving for lunch, we saw that it
was about to rain and another girl in our class had left the top on her convertible down. We ran back into the school to get some plastic to cover her interior. When we returned to school after lunch we told her what we did, and she replied, “No worries, if it got ruined my dad would fix it.” I was frustrated by her entitlement as I thought about how in my previous school, anyone would be happy with any car.

As an African American woman attending a historically White institution as an undergraduate, I experienced spoken and unspoken alienation, isolation, and exclusion. I was not alone; fellow African American women shared countless stories about discrimination and treatment that compounded our lived experiences as African American women. Success is personalized, a moving target, and only determined by the person pursuing their goals. Success to me as an undergraduate was three-pronged: to graduate with a degree; to leave a lasting impact on the college campus; and to balance being a student and an athlete. During my undergraduate career, my networks included family, friends, church, Purdue University Track & Field team, Black student union, and bible study group that was for my teammates that I started my freshman year of college. These networks provided me refuge, strength, and support from an environment that frequently antagonized my most precious identities, my race and gender.

As a graduate student working full time to obtain my master’s degree, success was learning a new field, being able to integrate my prior knowledge with new knowledge that helped me secure my purpose. Pursuing my Ph.D., success is finding my voice as a scholar in my research, strengthening my faith because it has been tested through this process, maintaining my other responsibilities outside of being a Ph.D. Candidate, and supporting other Ph.D. students to reach their goals. My success starting in elementary all the way to the pursuit of my doctoral degree has not been done in isolation of my networks, including my family, friends, church
family, mentors, mentees, and advisors. Without the support of my networks extending opportunities to me, allowing me to make mistakes as I learn, challenge my ideas and support my growth, I would not have been able to succeed in the ways that I define for myself.

As I reflect on these experiences, they taught me that differences (identity and ideologies) push me to learn the source of a person, empathy drives me to act, and networks are linked to opportunities that either bolster or hinder a person’s life. I was fortunate to gain opportunities that were linked to my parents and family that help to provide opportunities to serve and thrive in society. These experiences and many other similar experiences of serving have informed my approach to life, education, scholarship, and administration.

As an administrator, I have challenged colleague’s assumptions and my own assumptions about Students of Color and ensured that students’ concerns were not overlooked during critical decisions that could have negatively influenced their identity development and college experience. I recall times where I had to push back against my own defensive mechanisms or reflect on my privileges in situations. For example, when encountering other individuals who held one or two of my minoritized social identities in White spaces who magnified a stereotype placed on gender or race, I would sometimes think internally about the consequence of their actions that could compound the stereotype in the person’s head who was witnessing their actions. I consciously would push back against this feeling realizing that it was an attribute of internalized oppression and my desire to adopt a single narrative about what was deemed “acceptable” in those space by the dominant group, White people. I acknowledge that all of my experiences influence my lens and approach to this research.

Writing most of my dissertation proposal in Wilmington, North Carolina, while visiting my parents who live in a development that was once a plantation during the 1700’s, makes this
work even more meaningful. I reflected numerous times that people like me were not enjoying the same benefits that I experience today. That on the very ground that I stood on and wrote my dissertation proposal to become a Ph.D., there was a long line of injustices committed against those who came before me, and in contemporary times I still witness injustices against individuals who possess the same racial identity as myself. The difference of the injustice is that my parents own the land where once upon a time laws would have forbidden them to live the life that they live. Much has changed, but so much still remains the same.

During my summer of writing this proposal, I engaged in countless conversations with my 83-year-old grandparents, and other family members. My grandfather and grandmother shared stories about the racial integration they experienced while living on an Army base. They believe that they were often protected from blatant racism because they were a part of the United States Army, but when they reflect on their childhoods, they recalled traveling with their families and their parents packing lunches for them to eat when they stopped and rested during their travels. My grandmother shared that as a child she did not know any different but, as an adult, she understands that the packed lunches were not for having fun with the family, it was because they were not able to freely enter restaurants due to the laws prohibiting African Americans to eat, drink, and move freely in the United States in the ways White people did. My grandmother shared that even when she was a store manager on the Army base, she experienced racist bias from a police officer when one of her employees notified her that a person was stealing, so she called the police to report the theft. Once the police arrived, they approached my grandmother not as authority over the store as store manager, but as a suspect. Meanwhile the person who was stealing was a White person. A theme that threaded all our short and long exchanges
together was race and how racism interacts with our daily lives. Racism permeates society; therefore, racism is always present because of my skin color and has been with me my entire life.

I often wonder what it means to be free - free from racial stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, racism, and any other oppression that destroys the most beautiful parts of life. James Baldwin et al. (1961) summarized the constant witnessing and experiences of injustices in the United States as an African American: “to be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time” (p. 205). Despite my decision to live my life as freely as possible in the skin that I am in, and reclaiming peace of mind with finding fullness in my support networks (family, friends, church family, my advisor, mentors, and faculty), I am determined to persist despite the perpetual racial, political, and social injustices. I am hopeful because research calls out these injustices and seeks to find alternatives that hold institutions and individuals accountable for creating environments that help African American women to prosper. This study will contribute to the growing body of research focusing on the experiences of African American college women on historically White campuses in higher education.

With the above positionality in mind, I embarked on this research process engaged in a deep process of reflexivity. Reflexivity helps establish trustworthiness for the study, providing an opportunity for me as the researcher to “self-disclose ...assumptions, beliefs, and biases” (Creswell, & Miller, 2000, p. 127). Through a critical paradigm, I was able to "reflect on the social, cultural, and historical forces that shape” (Creswell, & Miller, 2000, p. 127) my interpretation of participants’ narratives. I described my beliefs and biases early in my research process allowing the readers of my study to understand my position and put aside as much as possible my biases as the study proceeds (Creswell, & Miller, 2000). As I moved through this
research study, I reflected and journaled to help uncover biases that may be informed from past experiences, so that I am clear on potential influences.

**Paradigm**

The “epistemological, ontological and methodological premises that guide the researcher's actions” (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p. 33) make up a researcher’s paradigm. I utilized critical/feminist paradigms to gain new insight into African American undergraduate college women for this study. Creswell (2007) suggested that qualitative researchers begin their research inquiry with certain assumptions or lens that they view the world through which are paradigms. A major strength of a critical/feminist paradigm is its commitment to challenging power and oppression. African American women are not free from oppression in multiple environments. “The reality of the Black woman then is that she is constantly engaged in a struggle for liberation of one form or another, be it in the home, in the community, in the global economy or as we all well know, in academia” (Steady, 2007, p.182). A critical/feminist approach has the potential to help me focus this study on the goal of liberation.

The term epistemology stems from the Greek word epistêmê, which means knowledge (Krauss, 2005). Trochim (2000) suggest that epistemology is the foundational knowledge of how people come to know something as truth (Trochim, 2000). Epistemology and ontology work in concert in research. Epistemology focuses on what a researcher already knows and ontology focuses on how they know what they know is true (Vanson, 2014). My epistemology acknowledges the socially constructed realities related to (race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, gender expression, and other identities) African American women's multiple identities and how boundaries placed in the campus climate constricts them. My epistemology moves beyond these constraints to allow African American women to define and operate within
their constructs. My paradigm acknowledges that within the toxic campus climate there are constraints that impede on their well-being but utilizing their networks, helps them succeed at HWIs.

Therefore, this study used a qualitative approach that centers the uniqueness of African American women (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2001) and values their knowledge. The purpose of this study was to engaged African American undergraduate women’s narratives about their experiences at HWIs toward an understanding of the strategies and networks they accessed, created, and employed to succeed. The aim of my study was not to generalize, but to share the rich, nuanced stories of participants’ experiences (Babbie & Mouton, 2001) and gain insight to strategies and networks participants in this study accessed, created, and employed to succeed.

Method

Participants

I used purposeful sampling with the intent to “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem” (Creswell, 2007, p.125). Purposeful sampling is a crucial characteristic of qualitative research that lends an opportunity for the researcher to strategically set the boundaries of research inquiry and select sample populations that are related to the line of inquiry (Patton, 2002). I identified 15 African American undergraduate women attending six different In the Middle of Nowhere University (ItMoN University), a pseudonym for the institutions in this study.

To identify potential participants, I directly contacted organizations and institutional staff and faculty that serve African American women. Participants represented diverse undergraduate years (first through fifth), socioeconomic statuses, sexualities, abilities, levels of engagement on campus, religious orientations, and other identities that provided richness to the narrative inquiry. I used a snowball technique with consenting participants at certain institutions when their
institutional response rate was low, asking them to refer other potential participants to the study (Patton, 1990). I screened participants to make sure that they provided information that would address my research questions. Twenty-seven women submitted a survey and I selected 15 women who comprised a diverse representation of African American women attending an ItMoN University and who identified support networks.

Appropriate sample sizes for narrative studies vary in scholarship (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002; Sandelowski, 1995). Creswell (2013) described that including one or two participants is sufficient unless an inquiry requires a more significant number of participants needed to develop a collective story. Patton (2002) suggested, “sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources” (p. 244). Sandelowski (1995) suggested that the sample size must be big enough to reach theoretical saturation but small enough to conduct an in-depth data analysis. I sought to explore single narratives of ItMoN University undergraduate students to provide a rich collective narrative of their experiences on a HWI campus; therefore, I recruited 15 African American undergraduate women. After collecting nearly 34 hours of interview data, I was confident I had established data saturation that met the purpose of my study and methodological approach.
Study Site: In the Middle of Nowhere University (ItMoN University)

I conducted a small, pilot study with two African American undergraduate women at a single ItMoN University with over 30,000 students, a large percentage of whom are undergraduates. During the Fall of 2018, African American women accounted for 1.6% of ItMoN University’s student body. The campus and college town in which it is situated are overwhelmingly White, with minimal representation of African American faculty and staff. African American faculty and staff also represent less than 3%. Through the pilot study, I learned about the African American women’s perceptions of the campus climate, including the compositional diversity, historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion, psychological climate, behavioral climate (Hurtado, 1998, 1999), and the organizational/structural climate (Milem, Dey, & White, 2004). The pilot study revealed that during their first year on campus, African American women felt that the campus climate was unwelcoming to their gender and racial identities. Therefore, I decided to pursue a dissertation study that explored the intersectionality of African American women at HWIs with similar institutional profiles and focus on how African American women succeed in their campus climates.

Conducting the dissertation study at institutions with similar types, features, and demographics allowed me to focus the interviews with participants on their conceptions of success and their strategies and networks they access, create, and employ toward that success. Once approved by the Institutional Review Boards (IRB), I recruited study participants who were currently enrolled at six institutions that are all public, HWI, four-year, large, highly student residential, R1 institutions located in the mid-western region of the United States (Table 1). The ItMoN universities were all founded in the nineteenth century and have undergraduate populations of less than 2% African American undergraduate women.
Table 1

*single race; excluding multiracial and Hispanic; i.e., reported ONLY African American

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Institution</th>
<th>Year Established</th>
<th>Student Population (Fall 2018)</th>
<th>African American Women (Fall 2018)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indiana University</td>
<td>1820</td>
<td>32,991¹</td>
<td>859 (2.60%)¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purdue University</td>
<td>1869</td>
<td>32,672²</td>
<td>481 (1.47%)²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Iowa</td>
<td>1847</td>
<td>24,503³</td>
<td>386 (1.58%)⁴</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Kansas</td>
<td>1866</td>
<td>24,815⁴</td>
<td>528 (2.13%)⁵</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Nebraska-Lincoln</td>
<td>1869</td>
<td>20,830⁶</td>
<td>272 (1.31%)⁶</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois-Urbana Champaign</td>
<td>1868</td>
<td>33,673⁷</td>
<td>1,221 (3.63%)⁷</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

Grounded in the paradigm described above, I engaged qualitative methods that allowed the participants’ stories to develop a portrait of their conceptions of success and the networks they access, create, and employ toward that success at ItMoN University. Narrative inquiry engages participants’ stories as meaning-making devices about the participants’ experiences in context (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). A narrative is a participant’s “account of events, symbolic representation of knowledge and experiences” (Saldaña, 2014, p.170) and researchers

1. https://tableau.bi.iu.edu/t/prd/views/uirr_sr_est_official_enrollment_public/HeadsandHours?%3Aembed=y&%3AshowShareOptions=true&%3Adisplay_count=no&%3AshowVizHome=no
2. https://www.purdue.edu/datadigest/
3. https://admissions.uiowa.edu/future-students/university-iowa-student-profile
6. T. Kalson (TotalHeadcountEnrollment by College,M ajor,D egree,R ace and Gender personal communication, April 9, 2019)
7. P. M. Graf (personal communication, April 9, 2019)
can understand participants’ stories in multiple ways, for example, vignettes, short tales, chronicles poems, and life lessons (Saldaña, 2014).

Narrative studies require multiple forms of evidence that support the findings (Creswell, & Miller, 2000). To gather thick, rich narratives of African American women’s experiences at ItMoN University, I employed individual interviews, participant poetry, and a focus group, all of which provided the data the led me to major and minor themes relative to the purpose of this study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

**Interviews.**

The purpose of conducting a narrative study provides participants to engage in the truth-telling of their unique life stories during interviews. My data collection process involved me sending a recruitment email to student affairs professionals, faculty, and campus leaders to disseminate to African American undergraduate women. The recruitment email asked the potential participants to complete an online interest form which included informed consent, demographic questions, and questions that clarified if they met the criteria to participate in this study. African American women who had incomplete forms or did not have the potential to answer questions related to their success and networks were not considered to participate in this study. Selected participants in this study provided informed consent, selected pseudonyms, and agreed to an audio recording (Creswell, 2014). A semi-structured and open-ended interview protocol helped me collect data from the fifteen participants.

During the interviews, I utilized open-ended questions because this format allowed for “exploration of lived experience as narrated in the interview” and allowed room for rich data to form out of contextualization of in-depth narratives (Galletta, 2013, p.9). According to Merriam (2009), semi-structured interviews are “guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and
neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time” (p. 90). Utilizing semi-structured interviews allowed me to adapt to my participant’s needs and discern the emerging themes as “the quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). I anticipated 60-90 minutes initially; however, the interviews ranged from a one hour and fifteen-minute to a little over three hours. Participants responded with in-depth responses to the semi-structured protocol. The protocol engaged the participants from a Black Feminist paradigm to reflect on their own agency by envisioning their ideal campus climate, and reflecting on the agency they have to create change. My protocol helped participants to reflect on their social and political experiences, identify their networks, and where needed, develop plans to invoke change to their current realities. Each interview generated rich data, by establishing rapport, and taking opportunities to probe deeper. Participants freely sharing helped to allow the data to generate naturally and provided validity for this study. I audio recorded the interviews, after receiving permission from each participant. Also, audio recording, note-taking, and journaling was a part of the interview process to help with reflecting on my performance as a researcher to ensure I was maximizing the research data collection process. I journaled after each interview to reflect on the participant and what I learned as a researcher. All Participants scheduled interviews were conducted on Zoom over the internet during a time that accommodated the participant’s schedules. Before each interview, I set up the audio recorder which ensured that their stories were captured adequately for the data analysis process. I sent audio files after each interview to Rev.com for transcribing.
Poems.

I had participants create a poem during the interviews (Appendix C) entitled, *I succeed*, which I adapted from George Ella Lyon’s *Where I’m From* poem to enhance the data collection by adding depth. I used poetry to help to understand my participant's experiences. Qualitative research allows for a wide range of methods to be used to understand the lived experiences of research participants (Janesick, 2016). Poetry helps to bring the “beginning and endings” (Young, 2010, p.86) of a person’s life together with stanzas. In addition to me contributing towards a body of research like Black Feminist Thought, and Critical Race theory, that disrupts the traditional norms, “poetry challenges traditional ways of thinking” (Janesick, 2016, p.32). Poetry empowers engagement and activism which is evident in the participant’s identity poems. Identity poetry is used as a mechanism to “capture participant’s lives” (Janesick, 2016, p. 36). Using the poem as another outlet to collect data provided an opportunity for participants to think critically and creatively about how they described their campus climate, self, and identified their agency as they expressed what they would change about their campus environment.

Participants were able to select particular words that described them and their experiences. Each poem offered uniqueness representing each participant's diverse lived experienced. Each participant customized a poem by filling in the blank lines. All participants selected a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality (Creswell, 2014), and all transcripts were cleaned to only use student’s’ pseudonyms and institutional/program pseudonyms. Participants received a $20 gift card to Amazon.com, a small gesture of gratitude for their time and energy given to the study.
**Focus Group.**

Focus groups allow for additional data that helps to explore the research questions further and helps with meaning-making (Creswell & Miller, 2000). During the sign up for the study, each participant was invited to join the virtual focus group to discuss the preliminary findings and conceptual framework, as well as interact with other women in the study. This providing me with additional data to understand and re-tell participant’s stories. Five participants contributed to the focus group. I audio recorded the focus group with permission from the participants.

Focus groups allow participants to share their ideas in an open and flexible subjective process while generating “data through group discussions” (Morgan, 1997, p. 30). As a researcher, I found it important to conduct a focus group to test preliminary results of my analysis with some of the participants in my study. They provided me valuable data during the focus group that helped me to further extend on my conceptual framework and final analysis. I then uploaded the focus group audio file to a professional transcription company approved by IRB, then read each transcript as I cleaned it for pseudonyms and corrections.

**Trustworthiness**

It is common practice for qualitative researchers to establish trustworthiness by keeping a research journal and conducting member checking and peer review (Creswell & Miller, 2000). To establish trustworthiness for this study, I scheduled 30 minutes after each interview to process the interview in a researcher journal. I reflected and wrote about what went well during the interviews, what questions went unanswered that I needed to follow up on, what questions need further development, what I learned about each participant, and what I learned about myself as a researcher and person. For example, after interviewing Halima who was my first individual interview, I made notes where to probe more around network questions. Another example came
after I interviewed Alex Lee and hearing how she described her campus climate as welcoming, my reflection led me to confront my assumptions as a researcher. I assumed that all participants in this study would describe an unwelcoming environment as informed by my literature review. However, that was not the case, and I made sure to allow each participant to explain their lived experience and present them as they described.

In addition to reflecting on the interviews, I reflected on ways my positionality entered the research process. For example, if a participant shared a specific story that made me feel defensive or was triggering for me, I wrote about that in my journal so that I could pay attention to the ways my own experiences were informing my scholarship. For example, when one participant shared about being a sexual assault survivor, she was brought to tears. The student affairs educator in me felt a strong pull to step in and support, but as a researcher, I showed empathy while continuing to move through the interview.

Scholars have described member checking as the reality of the people who are studied (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003) and as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Member checking ensured the accuracy of each participants’ narrative was captured correctly throughout the research process. Giving my participants access to their transcripts allowed them the opportunity to verify their contributions to the data and establish the trustworthiness of my study. I provided participants with the opportunity to confirm the data for the credibility of the information and their narrative account (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I followed Creswell and Miller’s (2000) advice to provide participants the opportunity to view the “raw data (e.g., transcriptions) and comment on their accuracy,” (p.127) by conducting individual member check with each participant after their interviews. I also conducted member checking during the focus group, where I “… ask[ed] participants if the themes or categories
make sense, whether they are developed with sufficient evidence, and whether the overall account is realistic and accurate” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p.127). I also provided participants the opportunity to respond to the final narrative which established further creditability of this qualitative study and I incorporated participants’ comments into the final narrative (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Peer review and debriefing provided an opportunity for me as a researcher to gain feedback from an external source. I engaged in peer debriefing as a third way to establish credibility by working with peers in my professional network who attended HWIs and were familiar with my research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Doing so provided dialogue about my early findings, challenged my assumptions, and helped push me to the next step methodologically, by asking questions about my methods and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I enlisted two peers to be my reviewers and debriefers; both individuals had experience with qualitative narrative methods and African American undergraduate women as the population for research inquiry. I sent the peer reviewers an outline of their role, an overview of my study, including the conceptual framework, the purpose, and methods of my research. I also sent them an agenda that included presenting my conceptual model, sharing early findings from the data as it related to the conceptual model, engaging in dialogue about the conceptual model, and listening to their feedback of things to consider as I moved forward with identifying my major findings.

Data Analysis

I used narrative coding and analysis in this study. This type of analysis allows “stories [to] express a kind of knowledge that uniquely describes human experience in which actions and happenings contribute positively and negatively to attaining goals and fulling purposes”
Social scientists use narrative analysis because of its utility to be “highly exploratory and speculative” (Freeman, 2004, p.74). Furthermore, a narrative analysis is helpful “for exploring intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions to understand the human condition through story, which is… a legitimate way of knowing” (Saldaña, 2016, p.154). Narrative analysis is also beneficial for “identity development; psychological, social, and cultural meanings and values; critical/feminist studies, and documentation of the life course” (Saldaña, 2016, p.155). The narrative analysis allows the researcher to listen and analyze particular characteristics form each participant’s narrative. To generate transcripts quickly and accurately, I hired a professional transcription company to transcribe all audio files to text files. Once I received the transcripts, I listened to the audio recordings to check for accuracy and cleaned the data regarding pseudonyms or any other potentially identifying information, before sending to participants for member checking. Each interview had a separate Microsoft Word file that I was able to send out for member checking.

After receiving corrections back from participants, I read the transcripts and “pre-coded” (Layder, 1998) by highlighting notable quotes that stood out to me (Saldaña, 2016). I then used open coding on each transcript to identify key ideas among the data (Merriam, 2002), first by hand. Then I uploaded each transcript into Dedoose software to code the interview data. One hundred seventy distinct codes emerged from participants’ responses from the semi-structured interview questions. I then re-read and evaluated all the interviews for similarities, and grouped them into categories. Ten categories surfaced from using a cross-case analysis (Saldaña, 2016) to aggregate the thematic codes across participants. The 10 categories -- (a) circles of support, (b) family support (c) peer support (d) goal/success (e) flourish with acceptance and support (f) being the Black woman in White spaces (g) accepting others’ difference (h) systemic (i) campus
climate (j) self-led me to the next step of axial coding, which included reorganizing those 10 categories based on similarities, which resulted in 3 categories of data—(a) environmental influences, (b) networks, and (c) self – and themes within each category.

Data Storage

I identified audio files and transcripts using only pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality throughout data collection and data analysis. I kept an identity key separate from transcripts and audio files, and all were stored on a password-protected computer. I permanently deleted audio files immediately after member checking. All physical data artifacts, such as written interview notes and participants’ poems, were stored in a locked file and only accessible to me.

Ethical Considerations

I worked directly with human subjects in this study. All participants in this study gave informed consent before participating in the study. Following the guidelines outlined in the Belmont Report helped to ensure an ethical research process involving human participants: (1) respect for persons, (2) beneficence, and (3) justice (Marczyk, DeMatteo, & Festinger, 2005). Respect for persons refers to respecting each by ensuring that individuals were not forced to participate, and they participated in the study of their own free will. Beneficence involves protecting the well-being of participants in this study. The potential benefits and risks associated with participating in the study were outlined to participants during the process to getting informed consent. I followed the three general rules informed by beneficence, "first, do no harm" (the Hippocratic Oath), maximize benefits and minimize risks. Finally, justice refers to treating all participants in the study in an equitable way throughout the study (Marczyk et al., 2005).
Potential Limitations of the Research

As with all research, my study has limitations. First, as a narrative inquiry study, this research is not meant to be generalized; yet, student affairs practitioners without education in research methods may assume that the findings of the study extend to all African American women at HWIs. Therefore, it is imperative to understand that participants’ stories may be relatable and translatable to other HWI environments, but are not generalizable. The recruitment of participants from multiple institutions (see Table 1) helps strengthen the translatability of this study; yet, ItMoN Universities are all situated in a specific geographical context in the U.S. HWIs in other regions may find the study findings difficult to translate to their contexts.

My familiarity with the data, subject matter, and relatability to the participants created an authentic and robust research study. However, these strengths in establishing trust had the potential for me to become too close to the research because of the relatability. Some participants could have thought that because we share common identities, for example, race and gender, they could assume that I understood what they were sharing without providing a more in-depth explanation. During the research study, I pushed myself to ask participants to elaborate when they shared their stories. I also used my reflexive journal to process my assumptions based on shared identities.

Chapter Summary

In this research study, I utilized a qualitative narrative approach to engage African American undergraduate women’s narratives about their experiences at a HWI toward an understanding of the strategies and networks they access, create, and employ to succeed. This approach enabled me to serve as a co-creator of knowledge with the participants and give voice to their experiences of success at HWIs. This study followed the data collection and analysis
procedures for narrative research by transcribing interviews verbatim and coding for initial, then
categorical themes. I used member checking, rich, thick description, and reflexivity to establish
the trustworthiness of the study.
CHAPTER 4

Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to engage African American undergraduate women’s narratives about their experiences at historically white institutions (HWIs) toward an understanding of the strategies and networks they access, create, and employ to succeed. The study was informed by their stories about their lived experiences, definitions of success, and strategies and networks of support that facilitate their success. The research findings emerged from the stories of 15 African American women ranging from 18-25 years of age and first through fifth years of college. Two participants, Ashley and Nevaeh, were non-traditional students. This chapter begins with an overview of the participants, including a brief vignette for each participant. I then discuss categories and themes in the data.

Overview of Participants

Fifteen participants were selected for this study and represented six different four-year, public, research-I institutions located throughout the Midwest United States that had similar racial demographics. The selection process for this study was based on the criteria discussed in chapter 3. The 15 participants identify as African American or Black women who have some shared and non-shared identities, with different lived experiences that shape their unique perspectives, and come from diverse backgrounds. Each participant’s contribution represents the uniqueness of her stories while sharing some similarities as African American women attending and succeeding at HWIs. Table 2 provides an overview of the participants.
Table 2

Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year in College (1-5)</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Sexual Identity</th>
<th>Socioeconomic Status</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Halima</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Spiritual/Christian</td>
<td>Cisgender</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
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Vignettes

This section describes each participant more fully. I developed profiles following an initial reading of the transcripts to capture background characteristics, participants’ perceptions of their campus climate, definitions of success, strategies for success, circles of support, and challenges to their college success. Each participant’s vignette closes with her individual poem written at the end of the individual interview. Developing the vignettes was an iterative process of reviewing the entries from my researcher journal following each interview, re-listening to the audio recording of each participant’s interview, and conducting
a broad review of the transcripts with the goal of ascertaining the overall storyline of each participant, her success, and her interactions within the campus climate.

Halima

Halima is a 20-year-old cisgender woman whose most important identities are being Christian and a Black woman. She is a junior in college who was born in Nebraska and grew up as a second-generation Ghanaian. In the beginning of high school, Halima “started to take interest in all things African.” She learned to love and boldly embrace her African culture while acknowledging that United States’ eurocentric culture does not always embrace that part of her. She reflected:

I learned to love African music. I learned to love African clothing and dresses. Even to prom, I wore this kind of like head wrap thing. And like the fancy one is called 'gelee.' And I wore that to prom. And I was like, “Well, if I look different than everybody else here ... then what?” Yeah, I guess just growing up it was a struggle trying to balance my life as an African ... as a second generation African, I guess you could say, in America. Where it's kind of looked down upon.

Confident in her African heritage, she described what it is like to be her full self when she is able to be “open...a silly, goofy person... positive, and to encourage others but also not be afraid to tell other people if they are doing something wrong...That’s important because we all have a part in teaching others.”

Halima’s commitment to others is reflected in her perspective on campus climate. She said:

I think my campus climate is pretty progressive. You know they strive for inclusion and they open the dialogue to... I’ve had these conversations about what makes us different.
You know they … we had a women’s march on our campus. It was two years ago that it started on campus. And they would go around downtown and basically, our campus is an area to implement change. That’s how I would describe it. We all believe in something. And we all strive to kind of change the world for the better. Yeah, I just think our climate is something that able to help us kind of make a difference in this world. We have all these marches. All these rallies where we come in discussions. Where we come together to talk about issues that not only affect us personally but affect our community and our organizations and things like that.

Halima believes everyone on campus is valued and has “something to contribute.”

Halima sees success as the achievement of goals. She said:

I feel successful because I was able to achieve my goals. Such as, studying abroad. Having the goal to kind of get good grades. You set goals for yourself and you work towards them and when you achieve that goal you feel accomplished. You feel successful. That’s how I view success.

Her racial identity development has been one of Halima’s challenges to her success. She reflected:

I’ve had kind of self-esteem, self-identity to figure out if I’m more African American than African because being in the African Student Association, you have those who were born in the diaspora and then you have those who were born on the continent. So not all of our experiences are the same and sometimes how we grew up with those experience kinds of affect the way we interact.
Halima’s networks of support are her “backbone” to her success. From her parents and siblings to her friends and others who acknowledge her success, Halima described her network as:

I feel like they provide a backbone for me. And so, If I’m feeling discouraged or disappointed, there’s not just one person that I can go to I have help from multiple people who are there for me all the time. They’re here to see me succeed and they’re also not afraid to tell me if I’m doing something wrong. I guess they just provide a backbone for me. They provide a network I can fall back on, I guess.

On campus, Halima feels supported by women friends of other nationalities that she met during her first year living on the same floor. She recalled:

I guess it was like most people on that floor were white people and so I found I was able to connect more with those who were not white. So, there were only a few of us…. My best friend who still on campus, she is from Bangladesh. She has immigrated here from that country. And she is Muslim. So, for me, that provides a different perspective on the world. And then, my other best friend, she is African American but, she went to school in our hometown. And so, for me, I feel I was able to not only connect with her but also to discuss our cultural difference.

Halima’s quote demonstrates that she can connect with her friends from other nationalities over their minoritized identities while learning about cultural differences between them.

**Halima**

I am ambitious.

I am a part of the African community and from Omaha.

I am successful with the help of all of my success networks.
Trustworthy, courageous, touching.

I am a seed, that grows from love and support.

I am cherished and encouraged.

I am trustworthy and courageous

I am a young leader and an educator.

I am a woman, who will train the world.

I am a spiritual African Queen who strives to unite her people in spaghetti, waakye. I am an advocate for those who are intimidated.

I will create a culture of unity and inclusivity to allow the growth of one self.

I am a daughter of the sun-kissed African continent and a visionary.

**Ella**

Ella is a 19-year-old first year, cisgender, Queer woman from Georgia, where she was raised among a southern church community. She is half African American, half South African, and went to a public school until fifth grade, then a private school focused on performing arts, and attended a Catholic high school. In describing her most important identities, Ella said:

Wooh! Wow, okay. So, I feel like I'm a Black woman first, only because when I wake up, that's not something I have to describe to anyone. It's also not anything that I can hide or change. And how I choose to move through my Blackness or turn down my Blackness, if I turn down my Blackness, is on me, but it's always something that's there. And I'm always a Black woman along with that. I am a writer. I used to use writing to like provide myself an escape from my reality, and now I let it reflect my reality. It also gets me paid. So, there's that. And it's my dream to get more Black women and representations of Queer, Black stories like on television and in Broadways that are not monolithic. I think
that ties them together. I'm Queer identifying, and I think a lot of my identities, like my personal identity are supposed to be things that hold me back, like things that marginalize me, but really they're things that like make my story more prevalent to other women like me.

Ella views her writing as an escape, as well as going to college. She said, “I escaped my family to go to college. I grew up like, in a very toxic environment.” Indeed, Ella said the biggest challenge to her success was not coming out as Queer until college, despite knowing she was Queer in high school. The tension between her Christian and Queer identities held her back from being her authentic self. She shared:

So, in high school, I knew I was Queer, but I did not ... Coming from a Southern Christian household, you just don't discuss that type of thing…But I did get into a relationship, which I did not expect. But I think there's something to say about how powerful it is for a Black woman to, in an unadulterated way, love openly another Black woman. In my current relationship, I am dating a Black woman who’s also half African, half Black. And in that I've found that there's some things that we understand about how to love each other that I wouldn't have gotten anywhere else. That I'm really happy about.

So yeah.

In addition to her girlfriend, Ella has felt supported by a network of Black women who are members of a specific National Pan-Hellenic Council sorority, including two of her elementary school teachers. “All the Black women in my life were a part of [Historical Divine Nine Sorority]. They really were my Moms. They really carried me. And ... Ooh I'm gonna cry. Really make me feel like I wasn't invisible. So. Very powerful women...”
Ella also feels supported toward her success by her living learning community, a residence hall floor designed as a safe space for Black students. She said:

I live on the Black Living Learning Community. So literally, it’s like going to a PWI and coming home to a HBCU. Amazing…. it’s so loving and understanding. We all have different interests, different majors, but we study together, we hold each other accountable. Because we want to see our people succeed.

The Black LLC has been especially important for Ella as she has experienced being the only Black person in the classroom. While Ella felt safe and supported as a Black woman in her LLC, when I asked Ella to talk about being her full self, the LLC was not the site of her example. Rather, Ella has felt embraced as her full self at a poetry slam.

Being her full self means this to Ella:

It feels like not choosing which part of my identity ... Which part of my struggle is important for the dialog. There are times when like my opinion matters because I'm a Black woman or my opinion matters because I'm a Queer person. And when I'm being my full self, my opinion matters because my opinion matters because I'm a person. And I don't have to turn up or turn down any part of me for me to be ... What I'm saying to be valid.

At the local slam, Ella “got to do a feature of me just going in (clapped hands) about the world.” She remembered:

And, you know, going in about my Father, going in about this school, like, making observations about the world that I live in and how this shit was unfair (clap hands together), and how we need to do better in calling out straight Black men. Even within my friend group who need to change and everyone was literally like, “Ashay sister.” Like
it was a space ... But poetry is always like that for me. Where it’s like a space in where you take what I’m saying as important. That was amazing.

More broadly on campus, Ella experiences the climate as a paradox, describing it as open and inclusive on one side of campus and racist and misogynistic on the other side of campus. She has observed a discrepancy in institutional acknowledgment between white and African American organizations, and she would like her institution to recognize the Multicultural Organizations and Multicultural Greek Organizations as resources and as a part of the broader campus community.

Ella initially described her success as overcoming her environmental challenges but expanded her definition to acknowledge that success does not have to be born out of persecution. She reflected:

I think I always see it as like an underdog or coming from a negative thing and making the positive. I don't think you have to be that. That has just been what my success story has been. But I do think that someone or things can be grown up in love and nurturing and positivity, and still be successful. Like success doesn't have to be defined by struggle. That's what I believe now.

The networks that support Ella’s success include people before college and during college. She mentioned the Black women who are members of a Historical Divine Nine Sorority from back home who challenged her with love and believed in her, so she then believed in herself. During college, she built on to her support system when she met her girlfriend and “siblings” or “chosen family” in her residence hall. Other campus networks of support for Ella are Black upperclassmen who are on campus saw something in her and like took her under their
wings and held her accountable, professors who push her to be better, and the African-American Cultural Center. Ella described her networks:

They help me be a student on this campus. They give me reasons and ways to not drop out, and to not fail. They help me focus on my goal, which is this degree. But they also like help me, personally, so that I can focus on school to get this degree. They never limit. They only affirm, and they affirm my full sense of self by not looking at me in the context of my struggle or of my identity. They look at me and they look at the complete version of me, and feed into everything that I am, and they never silence me or silence a part of me to do that.

Ella’s quote illuminates how her circles of support affirm and view all of her, not just pieces of her identity.

Ella

I am beautiful.

I am a part of a Southern Baptist and South African family and from Atlanta.

I am successful with the help of Black women. Empowering, assertive, listening.

I am a rose, because I’m pretty to look at and dangerous to touch.

I am loved and held accountable.

I am pushed to dream by my peers and covered by my older siblings

I am an enigma and vocal

I am queer, unapologetic

I am a product of apartheid and slavery

in corn, unseasoned chunky mash potatoes.
I am in love very deeply with a powerful Black woman

I will create more safe spaces for inclusion not silencing any one’s narrative.

I am actively being the change that I want to see.

I am choosing to not be the stereotype of Black women from the South.

Mia

Mia is a 19-year old sophomore from Indiana who is closely connected to the Black community on her campus, started a natural hair club, and has ambitions to run for other leadership roles within Black organizations on campus. Growing up she was educated from elementary school to sixth grade in a predominantly white environment, and seventh through 12th grade she was in a predominantly Black environment. Therefore, attending a college in a predominantly white environment was not a cultural shock. Mia described growing up “in a very stable household” with both her parents and two little brothers. She had “a lot of support” from church family, extended family, friends, everybody who helped to build up her self-esteem at a young age. She reflected:

My parents pushed me to do whatever I wanted to do, so, if I wanted to do it, then they was going to allow me to do it. The same went for my brothers. We all have dibble dabbled in anything and everything that our hearts desired to do. Just very supportive family.

Mia described her campus climate as “a load of bullshit.” She feels that although “campus is a bit more liberal” than the surrounding area that has racial tension off campus, but she still feels that “it’s just as bad as it is outside of campus. It’s still very divided. It’s like Black [ItMoN University] and then the rest of [ItMoN University]. It’s very separated.” Mia provided an example of when a white woman who was her peer on campus posted a racist post and the
campus administration came to the white woman’s defense. She stated that many people on campus are “closed minded, closed-off to the idea of true diversity and true understanding of other people that we just end up nowhere.” On the other hand, Mia likes that her institution has an abundance of campus resources that students can explore. She said, “There’s literally something going on to help you elevate yourself every single day…”

Like Ella, Mia described the on-campus Black LLC as a place where she feels free to be her full self. She shared:

It's the all Black floor in one of the dorms which most [Scholarship program for African American students] kids end up living on. So, my friends lived up there, so I was on [the floor] all the time. Like I had a little sticker with my name on the door. Everything. Had a little bag. Toothbrush. Toothpaste. All of it. Like I basically lived on [the floor]. And everybody would just come out of their rooms, music and just having a good time, vibing it, everything and it was like I'm getting to be my true Black self with my true Black people and I really, I just love it….

Some of the strategies that Mia uses to succeed include connecting with classmates to study and going to the teaching assistant or professors when she needs help. Mia accesses parental advice from her Dad as it relates to future job opportunities, campus resources, like the career success office, relying on her inner drive, and chasing all opportunities to be successful. Mia’s top strategy is to always plan for the unexpected and expected situations, she said:

You just cover your bases, just making sure that at any time … Just little things that you know, be like snack. I wish I would have done that a while ago. I wish I would have had this with me right now. It's literally just those little things. Taking your shower at night, so that you're not scrambling in the morning. Or, doing your hair two days before, so that
it's presentable when you have to go to this dinner, two days in the week. Or keeping a phone charger with you everywhere you go....It's just the little things that keep you covered. Doing your homework. Working ahead, so making sure that you're ahead of your work. And see, I'm four weeks ahead of my work, right now. I want to be so lazy but it’s like girl! Watch, you're going to be booed up with [Ray], and then you're not going to do any work, and you'll be looking stupid because you stopped, and you're going to be behind. Just keep moving forward. Keep being on top of your work, like have your back. Always having your back. So important. Oh so important.

In addition to covering all her bases, Mia’s response demonstrates that working ahead and prioritizing her school helps her stay “on top of [her] work.”

Reflecting on her strategies towards overcoming adversities, Mia shared:

Okay. I call my mom. I rant. I cry. Then I buckle down. I figure out what I need to do. If I don't like what I need to do, then I probably calculate the amount of losses I can take. If I can risk taking that L, I take it. If I can't, I suck it up and I do it. When things get really hard, like I said, I just try not to dwell on it, and I literally just try to push through because life is not going to stop for anything. I reach out to see whatever else I can do to help me get back on top. So, if I miss a couple of assignments or whatever, oh is there any extra credit that I can do? Is there something that I could help you with to make up this work? Just whatever the case may be. If I'm not understanding something, reach out.

Mia’s quote reveals that she has a process for navigating challenges, venting to her mom who is in her support network, releasing her emotions through crying, then “buckle[ing] down” to identify and execute the best plan for a resolution.
Mia

I am passionate.

I am a part of a supportive environment and from a small town.

I am successful with the help of the wisdom from my mom.

Beautiful, helpful, gentle. I am a sun ray, soft but prominent.

I am church and family. I am uplifting and pushing me forward.

I am never alone and I will always have more opportunities to do things if I miss out on one.

I am a Black woman, with drive to prove that

I am worthy to whomever I need to prove it to

I am big and educated

in mayonnaise, pomegranate

I am sports psychology

I will create inclusion, acceptance, and an inclusive campus that allows for the overall betterment

of the campus community, learning from one another

and growing as individuals and as a whole.

I am not beneath anyone because of my Blackness and womanhood.

I am fulfilling the calling that the Lord has placed on my life.

Ashley

Ashley is a 22-year old junior who was raised by her mother and has two older brothers.

She grew up in the house with one of her older brothers. Ashley is from the South suburbs of Chicago. Her dad was using drugs and alcohol and not present in her life. Ashley’s race and gender are two important identities because that is how other people view her. Ashley came to college after enlisting in the Army as a nurse. Therefore she is a non-traditional student and
started college at the age of 21. During her first year in college, she lived in veteran housing and views aspects of the social life differently from the majority of her peers as it relates to the party culture. Currently she lives off campus in an apartment. She enjoys participating in athletic activities, like powder puff on campus. She belongs to a Divine Nine Sorority and feels included on campus because of her sorority sisters. She enjoys her college experience much more because she switched majors and feels more supported by her professors. Relationships are huge for her and she feels that she has established strong networks. She recognizes that she has privilege in that she does not have to worry about college tuition because of she receives GI Bill benefits and her social privilege of belonging to a Black Greek Sorority. Her description of her campus climate demonstrates that her campus is both inclusive and exclusive. Students unite around football and party culture but are divided when it comes to Greek life. In her poem, she references her experience at her institution as an “ice cream sundae” because “it's good but it can be messy at times, but it makes you happy.” Her perspective highlights the contradiction of her experiences on her campus. She shared:

…all of the alumni and current students here value…football, even though we are horrible, but that always brings people together. I would say the university…values diversity? I would hope that that's true by saying that, but I think so. There is a representation of a lot of different cultures and racial backgrounds. I would say they value, everyone pretty much values academics in general….The students are driven ….. I would bring the communities closer together because it seems like on my campus there is a Black community, there's an international student community, and then there is everyone else. And then on another level within those communities there is the Black Greek life and then there is all the other Black kids and then I don't know how to speak
on Greek life on other communities, but then there is Greek life as a whole on campus and then everybody else. I feel like those communities should just merge together and be like, "We're all here on this campus." Or even within the communities, not having several communities. Not even Black and Greek or just Black, bring it together and just all do something together instead of having this hierarchies.

Her response conveys a desire for the campus to unite instead of organizations staying in siloes. She views success as a balance between academic achievement, helping others through community service by giving back, and enjoying a social life. Ashley summed up her thoughts about success saying:

I think all those three things, when they all are balanced into the top then it defined college success. Success in general, I would say is more so about the impact you make on the people around you. You can make a million dollars, but if you didn't do nothing for anybody else, it doesn't mean anything. No one is going to remember that, but if you made a million dollars and gave a million dollars back somehow and affected just one-person life and made something better for them, then you're successful.

The strategies Ashley employs to succeed are volunteering, finding individuals who strive for academic excellence as herself, and engaging with her campus social life, which allows her to “meet a bunch of different people.” Ashley continued describing her strategies:

I've always volunteered since I got on campus. That is something I wanted to give was my time. I volunteered at the local elementary schools, I volunteer at the local food pantry. I'm a mentor for a ton of kids here….I give back that aspect to the communities that have helped me since I've been here…. Academically, what helped me is I guess just like just surrounding myself by people who were trying to do the same thing one and then
two, realizing that it is okay not to be like all A's, 4.0…. Socially I don't know.... I still want to remain who I am but also still come out of my comfort zone and still do things like that, but you're not going to catch me out every weekend going out. But I try to make myself more present to party activities, or even something I did this school year, which was I was more social, but still in what I was comfortable with. I played powder puff football, so that was something that I enjoyed because I love sports, but the I was able to meet a bunch of different people.”

Her circles of support include her family that consists of her mother and two older brothers and her Sorority Sisters. In conversation, she shared how her professors, and peers that she meets through sports activities on campus support her. Ashley shared that the only challenges or what she calls “stressors” is school work which is in her control to handle, in conversation she reflected on not having to worry about her college tuition or house because she receives financial support from the military and a scholarship from her school. When reflecting on her stress, she said, “I feel like the only stresses and stuff I could have would be like school work based challenges and that's my fault if that's happening. Just got to get the work done (laughter).”

Her response exhibits her mindset not to allow anything to stop her success, not even herself.

Ashley

I am outgoing.

I am a part of a crazy [family] and from South Suburbs of Chicago.

I am successful with the help of strong relationships that were built during college loving, unconditional, loud. I am an African violet, independent.

I am family and sisters. I am supportive and relief from outside forces.
I am using your resources and don’t quit. I am Black woman. I am loved, persevering and strong in ice-cream sundae, fried chicken. I am strong willed, driven, and humbled.

I will create diversity and inclusion. I am me with all of my identities without all of them I would be someone different. My success gives me the resources and outlets to help those in need as well as create a more stable environment for myself.

**Hannah**

Hannah is an 18-year-old freshman who was born in Kansas and attended a private school in the United States. She later moved to Canada and attended a public school for a year but did not like the experience, so she went back to receiving private education and Islamic schooling where she learned about her religion. Growing up she was surrounded by family and love that helped her embrace her Somalian ethnicity and Muslim religion. She identifies with her Somali roots despite being born in the United States. Being her full self is being comfortable with who she is and not changing who she is for anybody else. She feels that she is getting to a place where she feels “comfortable in [her] skin, especially on campus.” Living as a Black Somali, Muslim woman who is majoring in Science, Technology, Engineering, Math (STEM), she’s hyper-aware that her identities are minoritized. She said, “For me it would have to be the fact that I check off all of these boxes. I am a female. I'm in STEM. I wear a hijab.” Yet, she expressed being comfortable with her identities:

Whenever I see that somebody feels uncomfortable around me just because I'm visibly wearing a head scarf. I'm visibly ... Like the color of my skin, I can't change that stuff. If I see people who are uncomfortable, I'll just smile at them. I don't have to necessarily change anything about myself to make them feel more comfortable, because that's not my problem. That's their problem, that they're not comfortable with who I am as a person.
At a young age, Hannah felt the pressure of responsibility and academic pressure to perform. Hannah describes how she felt being the older sibling of three boys, her oldest cousin, and the only daughter in her immediate family. She said, “I always felt this pressure on my shoulders to be a good role model for them, and to be a good example.” Hannah learned how to excel academically from the pressure that was placed on her at a young age to perform academically when her class performed poorly on a standardized test in fourth grade and then turn around and did well in the seventh grade, she said:

When it was my class’ turn to do the seventh-grade test, we had studied so often that…
They would put a lot of pressure. We were 12 years old. We were seventh graders.
Then we ended up being the best in all the province. Then everybody was really surprised, I think that the same class that did the worst, did the best. Then they had this constant image to protect so they would kind of project onto the younger grades, “Okay, you guys have to keep up with what the other grades did. They came from the worst and they ended up being the best.” Just that experience of improving, I think so early on in my life, it leaked into the rest of my life.

Hannah’s strategies for success were established by her experiences of academic pressure as a child. For example, she always had the ambition to excel academically and build strong relationships with her teachers starting in grade school. Hannah said:

I always strive to be on the Honor Roll. I learned how to talk my way into things, if that makes sense. I would talk a lot to teachers, and I would get really close to them. Then when the time came for grades, then they would just give me the grades that I wanted.
She describes her campus climate as extremely white and in conversation acknowledged that she has a desire to connect with other Black students, but she does not see them on campus or in class. However, she feels comfortable to voice her opinions on campus.

Hannah describes her success as something that was initiated by her to work towards achieving her goals so she could help her family. Hannah shared her perspective on success:

I feel like to be successful, you have to be sufficient. You don't necessarily have to be self-sufficient, but you have to be sufficient and you have to be okay with the way you are. You have to acknowledge that you're working hard, and that you're putting in effort, and that it's taking you where you have to go. I don't know. I think that personally, the way I view my success is gonna be, if I'm able to help out my family. So, if I'm able to give back to my family in the way that they gave back to me and if I'm comfortable with the lifestyle that I'm living, and if I'm able to provide for my future family, too. Yeah, and if like I'm happy with where I am. I don't want to regret where I am and the choices I made to get there.

Reflecting on strategies that help her succeed, she said, “I always put my education first. …. Then after that, I try to get involved as much as I can on campus.” She is involved with a pre-med fraternity, student senate, and MSA (Muslim Student Association). She shared that she joined the organizations so that she is “able to connect with people.” Hannah also built a relationship with her TRIO advisor; she said “TRIO. It's for ….People from underrepresented communities and stuff. I got close with that advisor. She's been helping me kind of sort myself out.” She also talks with her uncle who graduated college not too long ago. She said, “he could relate and give me advice and stuff.” She summarized her thoughts about her strategies of networking by saying, “Just having all these connections with people who can give me support
when I need it, and push me, and get me where I need to go.” Formally she includes her family, friends on campus and back home in her circle of support and said “they always remind me to balance myself. That yeah, my education is important, but so is my well-being, and so is my happiness.”

Hannah has shared that she always applies for opportunities, she said:

I have this mentality where it's like, I'll apply for everything. The worst thing that someone can say to me is no. I've come to terms with, not everybody is gonna want me in their corner, but for the people who do, I'm an option. I'll apply and if I get it, that's a good thing for me. If I don't, then I'm dodging a bullet or something like that.

She handles her challenges to success with the same mindset. When faced with challenges to her success she uses her support circle as a sounding board to talk out her feelings and gain a different point of view. She shared an example that happened during her first college exam period and she “was really stressed out” and she “didn't know how to study,” she said, “I just didn't know where to start. I just started talking to the girls that I was studying with. They were just like, girl just calm down. You're thinking way too hard into everything. You just need to focus on one task. They kind of deescalated the situation.” She said she was able to calm down and focus on just one thing instead of overwhelming herself with everything she had to do.

Hannah

I am unapologetic.

I am a part of large and from a diverse city.

I am successful with the help of ambition and drive bold, colorful, sweet. I am rain, creates growth.

I am family, friends, and fraternity.

I am unapologetic.

I am a part of large and from a diverse city.

I am successful with the help of ambition and drive bold, colorful, sweet. I am rain, creates growth.

I am family, friends, and fraternity.
I am understanding and excited.

I am persistence and patience.

I am Somali, Muslim.

I am full of history in mild butter chicken, tea without spice.

I am persistence and will fight for what I believe in.

I will create an area that accepts everyone for who they are

to learn from others is as important as teaching others about yourself.

I am an unapologetic minority and I am willing to do whatever it takes to succeed.

**Luigi**

Luigi is a 22-year-old fifth-year senior from Indiana who grew up in a conservative, white environment with her parents and brother. Luigi desired to be around the Black community once she went to college but quickly perceived that she did not fit in among the Black community. As a Black woman with Latina roots, she tried to discover her Latin ethnicity once she got to college. After exploring the Black and Latinx communities, Luigi felt she did not “fit in,” she felt “ostracized.” Luigi ended up joining an Asian Sorority and running for a leadership position and is active in her organization. She taps into her identity of being a woman strongly because her mother was her idol growing up, “I just want to set an example, be a blessing to other people. And, I think being a woman gives me a unique opportunity to do that especially because I feel like it's so necessary in these times.” Luigi struggles with anxiety and depression and recalls experiencing her first anxiety attack sophomore year. She remembers working 20+ hours a week, juggling school, personal life, and social life. She was at work when she had to drop everything she was doing and run to her room because her chest tightened until it was hard to breathe. She cried and dreamed about her relatives back at home. Her aunt later told
her that she remembered having anxiety attacks in college and that her stress issues never began until she left home as well. Luigi is learning to live with her mental health issues:

It is an everyday thing. I have learned to deal with the bipolar emotions, the suicidal thoughts, the panic, the disassociation from life, everything. I know there are wonderful programs on my campus to help deal with mental health issues. And I often refer many of my friends to them. But I have not used these programs myself. I am working up the courage to do so, but it is difficult coming forth and admitting I need help. Most of the time, I clear my schedule, and I drive home. Nothing feels like a safer space than my family. No matter what issues I go through, they have my best interest in heart.

Although mental health is one of her obstacles, she does not allow it to limit her success or helping others. In her poem, she stated the following:

I will create a passionate and supportive nonjudgmental environment that will consider mental health issues not as uncommon but as everyday challenges that we all go through. I am done sending young adults to their deaths because I do not want to open my ears. I am here to help those who need me, talk for those who can’t and be a blessing to others.

Luigi describes her campus climate as “super white,” and does not feel that there is an adequate acknowledgment of diversity, and particularly historically racialized minorities. However, she states that her university “is a great place, is good at education but not much more than that and literally nothing else and not even just the school itself, but the local environment, it just needs years of development.” Her response demonstrates the contradiction of a benefit with education and a drawback of her school and local environment. Her description of her campus climate follows this contradiction, she said:
It's not like unwelcome to diversity, but it's just like ... it doesn't know how to handle
diversity, so ....You know, what I found at [ItMoN University], so. It's not the best. Even
[college president], he's not the best ... he's not the most understanding. And I know a lot
of students feel like he's being paid off, you know, by the highest bidder. Yeah, it's hard
...I don't know. [ItMoN University] is great place to get an education, but beyond that,
you know, growth and development, especially for minority students, it's on your own
initiative or you collaborate with the Black Cultural Center or something like that. Not
much opportunity here... that's it.

Luigi defined success as “finishing with a degree, growth in life skills, and personal
development.” Ultimately, Luigi believes success is fostered by who is in your circles of support.
She described the importance of surrounding herself with a support group, she said, “Make sure
that they inspire you, just as much as you inspire them….surround yourself with people that you
wanna be like or you know, that are like going places because your environment matters the
most.” She said her circle of support includes, “my mother, my friends, my enemies, my life
coaches, politics and media, my consciousness, and my aspiration.” Luigi said:

My mother is a fountain of knowledge. She has been through all the same issues I have at
her age, and while taking care of a baby. She is a super woman. In high school, I hated
her. She rarely showed love, and always criticized my work. But when I left for college,
she was so proud. She sent me so much support, advice, and acceptance. Now the
relationship is vital to my life. She continued sharing that her mother has “faced the
same trials and tribulations of higher education, identity crisis, emotional stress, family
illness, etc. I just ask her, and she has enough experience for the both of us.”
She shared that her strategies to succeed include “keeping humble and committing to your responsibilities.” She views college as a privilege.

**Luigi**

I am quiet, strong, resilient, individual and caring of others.

I am a part of small family from a big background and from a small, quiet Catholic little town.

I am successful with the help of family, friends, mentors and enemies. Caring, honest, feeling.

I am Brussels sprouts, crispy, delicious and good for you. I am my student loans, my best friend.

I am costly and non-judgmental.

I am a librarian and ghetto.

I am thoughtful, analytical.

I am third culture kid in Sushi, Long Island ice tea.

I am my advisor who told me not to worry that letter grade, D meant done and I was done with that class.

I will create a passionate and supportive nonjudgmental environment that will consider mental health issues not as uncommon but as everyday challenges that we all go through.

I am done sending young adults to their deaths because I do not want to open my ears.

I am here to help those who need me, talk for those who can’t and be a blessing to others.

Success for me is getting my degree so I can be a CEO and little Black girls who don't identify with the norm can look up to me.

**Alex Lee**

Alex Lee is a 19-year-old first-year student from Kansas who grew up in a predominantly white environment with her parents and brothers. She is a biracial, Malay and Black woman, and identifies as a Black woman. Her religion is the most critical identity for her. Alex Lee
reflects on being Muslim; she said, “religion has always been in my life since I went to that Islamic school growing up. You know, it creates a sisterhood and brotherhood people, even if you've never met them.” She grew up in a predominantly white suburb, but when describing her neighborhood, she mentioned that she spent a lot of time with “like Arabs, Pakistanis, you know every brown person you could imagine, so that was my culture. And Islam has its own kind of culture…So I was very comfortable, very happy.” She went to an Islamic school during the early part of her life, and then was home-schooled but got lonely, so she returned to the Islamic school. During high school, she went to a public school, which was the first time that she was “submerged in an environment that was not only predominantly white, but predominantly not Muslim as well.” Alex Lee reflects on the transition from a diverse environment to a predominantly white environment, she said:

The first year or so was very rough and very hard for me. I was used to knowing everyone, looking like, well, not looking like everyone, but there's so much diversity … not sticking out, so that was a very pivotal point in my life, but after that, after high school I got very used to it, and so now my life in college, you know, very natural for me. In fact, these are probably, so far have been like the best years of my life, so I'm really enjoying it.

She experienced a culture shock when she went to high school because of being surrounded by people who never came in contact with a Muslim before. She said:

Where I'm from is very, not hick as people would say, quote - unquote, but very Republican, a lot of people probably never in their life have ever, or actually I know that most of them had never met a Muslim before, and I was the only one who wore a scarf [hijab] in the entire school, so when I walked in, I remember people were staring at me so
hard, and it wasn't because they weren't trying to be mean, just they genuinely had never seen anyone like me before. And I, for some reason I remember anytime anyone said anything about bombs, since of like 9-11, that made me so uncomfortable, because people would look at me. And so, any little thing. Any little thing just made me feel like “Oh my gosh, I'm such an outcast.” I dressed different, my mannerisms were different. We called teachers sister and brother, and then at this school it was Mr. and Mrs., that was weird too. It was, there was a lot of things that were done differently that were small, but added to my discomfort of being there.

Alex Lee lives off campus because living on campus was more expensive. She works to help her parents out with car, food, electricity for her apartment. She shared, “they already pay my tuition, you know, let me do my part. That's why I've always had a job.”

Alex Lee has a positive outlook on her campus climate because students are listened to and able to advocate for speakers to come to campus, diverse political views are accepted, and faculty are very outspoken about helping others, listening to your fellow student.... “It's very ideal, it's what I would want out of a college.” She also shared that “one of the deans who was very good and a lot of students really liked,” was moving to another institution and “they enlisted the students help in filing a petition to keep him, because they felt like that was most beneficial for the students.” She concluded, that the institution promotes student involvement and “the students speak their mind, and it's all for the benefit for community. I really appreciate that. And I think that's great.”

Her definition of college success includes “achieving an academic goal which you have set for yourself during the time you are a college student.” She also believes that perseverance contributes towards success, “regardless of how difficult the goal is, if you have persevered
through challenges and have achieved a major goal and your progress towards your education, you are successful.” Her strategy for success is to block distractions that will keep her from being successful. Alex Lee deleted her social media so she could focus on her studies, going to the library to study, getting sleep, not procrastinating by taking notes before class and completing homework ahead of time. Alex Lee has the ambition to become a Dermatology Physician Assistant and believes that the strategies of “eliminating distractions” during her undergraduate college career will prepare her later to achieve her long-term goals. “You have to build yourself into the habits now, so that it becomes a habit…. if you want to succeed, but also it's important to instill very early on if you plan to be successful long-term.”

Alex Lee’s circles of support include her parents, friends, and advisors. She handles challenges to her success with a positive outlook, “if I allow myself to just be overwhelmed with the stress, I won't be productive, I'll be an emotional wreck. You know, you have to keep going.” She focuses on acknowledging and persevering through challenges, she said:

…there are people who are in way worse positions and were able to continue to thrive...I think it's my very strong mind and being able to tell myself, No, it's okay. I know you're struggling. I know that this is hard. But you have to keep going because this is what you want, right? You know you want to come to ItMoN University, you know tuition is expensive, you know you want to be a dermatology PA, so this is what you want you got to do what it takes." Because I know there are some people who don't have that but I'm fortunate that I do so I use that to my advantage.

Alex Lee

I am Black.

I am a part of a diverse family and from a small town.
I am successful with the help of motivation from myself and support systems academic, hardworking, soft.

I am a cat, fluffy, sweet, and loving.

I am family and friends.

I am encouraging and non-judgmental.

I am determined and responsible.

I am biracial I am female and caretaker.

I am Liberian, cozy, comfortable in cheesy breadsticks, and sausage pizza.

I am Mrs. Bonnet who supported me through constant procrastination in school.

I will create tolerance, confidence, trust, and appreciation without it the brain grows but the heart does not.

I am necessary for individuality and, am a contribution to diversity in society.

I am necessary to contribute to my community and the progress of my world.

**Gabby**

Gabby is a 20-year-old junior from Illinois who grew up with her parents and two older brothers in a diverse neighborhood. She was the only girl out of six children. Gabby was always close with her dad growing up but built a closer relationship with her mom when she became older. Her parents always instilled in her the value of education. Her dad never completed high school, and her mom graduated from high school and was illiterate until the fifth grade. Her parents worked in blue collar jobs. Although her parents did not have the
opportunity to attend college, they always reminded her of the importance of education, and why getting a higher education was important. She knew that she would pursue a college education at an early age. Growing up she spent a lot of time with her church family and “I did a lot of work within the church.” She did well academically growing up. Gabby was nervous transitioning to college, “I was very nervous. I'm a first-generation college student, so for me I had no idea what to expect. I had a limited amount of people to talk to about, like what do I say.” She reflected on navigating the college environment:

Even the small things like, when do I buy textbooks, or how to pick my classes. I was really nervous, and the first semester of my freshman year at college was very difficult for me, personally. I was taking a lot of classes that were very difficult, at the same time. So, I didn't really know where to split my time, and I wasn't excelling as well as I had in high school, and previously. So, I was a bit nervous and was going to tutoring and reaching out to different people. Nothing was really seeming to work for me. So, during that time I kind of was really sad and just depressed about my academic performance.

Gabby’s race and gender, being a Black woman, are most important to her and she shared in conversation how these identities have shaped her into who she is today. “Often times have to prove myself to people, and show them that I'm worthy of opportunities, or worthy to be listened to, or understood, or respected.” She feels that her classmates do not understand her, Gabby said:

The people who I go to school with, or my classmates, don't really understand me and they expect for me to be different than I am. A lot of people who I encounter, it's their first time being around Black people, or they grew up in rural areas where they never met anyone who didn't look like them. So, media and all of these other perceptions kind of
give them an ideal of what Black people are like, and misrepresent us. So then when they
do meet us, they're expecting a different stereotype.

She describes her campus climate as very divided and centered on whiteness and shared feeling
excluded even from people from the surrounding community. She recalled an experience when
reflecting on her campus climate, she said:

I don't really feel as welcomed at certain things. For example, a few nights ago I went to
a basketball game at our arena. Which, since it's a Big Ten it's like a big arena. I was with
my friend and we were literally some of the only Black people in the stadium, except for
the players. I just didn't feel as if I was welcome there, or if I was supposed to be there.
Even the way that people were looking at me from the surrounding communities, who
come to the games. The way that they were looking at us, it felt as if we didn't belong and
that's typically, how I feel on campus, as if I don't belong to the campus community, but
rather as a sub-group of the community. I think that being me on campus feels lonely and
isolated, except for those times where I'm with the sub-group of African American
students that I typically engage with, or that I'm in registered student organizations with
them…Other than that, just walking around and going to class, I don't really feel a part of
the community. I feel separate.

She describes success as “excelling within academics and leaving a mark on the
campus….being hard working and being willing to face obstacles and challenges as they
occur.” Gabby had to learn strategies through trial and error. “I didn't really know how to study.
Even though I did well in high school, I didn't really have like a study system that I knew worked
for me. Like, if I study this way, I know that I'll do well, and now I've developed that.” She sets
aside time to study. “Even I know, during two or three hours in the morning” and when she does
not have class, she is in the library working ahead, or studying for and exam in advance. “So, that when it comes, I'm not rushing to get it together. So, that has really helped me succeed academically.” Gabby handles challenges by eventually persevering through them and keeping a focus on her long-term goals:

I'm always just like, "Oh yeah, that's a challenge. Let me get up and try again."

Sometimes it really makes me sad, or I'll be upset about failing or something, for a couple days. Then, I realize that I really want to get my degree and it's something that I really want to work towards and I am going to get it. So, for me, that motivation of just getting that degree and keep going. I do want to attend graduate school and eventually get my PhD, so that's something that I want to do. I just always see that goal for myself and that keeps me going.

**Gabby**

I am kind.

I'm a part of a chaotic family, and from a suburban neighborhood.

I am successful with the help of people who push me.

Like-minded, successful, loud, I am a sunflower, a bright colored sunflower.

I am a sister, friend. I am challenging and fun. I am worthy and motivated.

I am capable, determined. I am bondage in white bread, ramen noodles.

I am a friend who lets me cry on their shoulder when I was having a bad day.

I will create a place in which people can feel comfortable in their own skin.

An inclusive campus allows you to be successful and meet your long-term goals.

I am willing to challenge myself, and reach diversity to reach success.
It's important for me to be successful because I know what I am capable of achieving at the end when I put my mind and best foot forward.

**Khyler Keaton**

Khyler is an 18-year old freshman from Indiana who attended a predominantly Black private school run by Black women who were members of a Divine Nine Sorority and later attended a public school. She always excelled academically. Her religion, race, and gender are important to her identities. She shared that one of those identities is "hidden." She stated that her race and gender are what “people see first …. I feel like that jumps out at people when they look at me, whereas religion is ... my religion is hidden when they see me.” She continued, “but I feel like my religion is a big part of who I am and it influences my thoughts and my actions, so I'd probably say that would probably I feel like that identify ... not identifies me most, just because it's so hidden, but I feel like it drives everything that is my life, all components of my life.”

Khyler describes her campus climate as “not good.” She acknowledged the benefit of college is that it helps students develop into independence, “college promotes a lot of individualism. Like, you're growing up to be an adult here. You're choosing your own path. And you're sticking to it, or if you don't wanna stick to it, and having the choice to choose your own direction.”

She describes college success as “academic achievement, graduating with high honors…getting a high score on the MCAT,” as well as being present and giving back to her community. Khyler also sees success as “perseverance, overcoming adversity, personal development, improving oneself holistically… making yourself marketable, to be an asset in desired workplace.” Khyler concluded her definition of college success with the following, she said:
There's really no cap to how far you can go, what heights you can reach…. You can always keep going. There's always room for improvement. And then also, once you feel like you're there, or you feel like you would describe yourself as successful, definitely reaching back as well towards people who haven't made it to your success yet. Talking to younger people when you get there, or just always reaching back.

Khyler said that she relies on conversations with her parents and people “who can still remind you of what you're there for, and have your best interest in mind, and can remind you of where you're trying to go,” and how having phone call with her support circles helps her “stay on top of it.” She also accesses her Christian faith and maintains people around her who can uplift her to accomplish her goals, “my faith helps me, the people who I surround myself with, my friends, and other people who aspire to be in the medical field, by participating in organizations with like-minded people.” Khyler also finds the importance of staying true to who she is by advocating for things that are important to her. She stated:

I still think that being an advocate of diversity is very important to me as well. So, it's just part of having a sense of yourself, or a little sense of where you wanna go, and finding people who want to do the same thing as you.

Giving back is another part of her strategy towards success, “once you feel like you have defined yourself as successful, reaching back to bring other people up.” Khyler has an internal drive. She said, “I am fueled by the success of others. In other words, competition helps me strive for success.”

Her circles of support also include her family, friends, and her relationship with God. She shared how her parents keep her grounded by reminding her why she is in college and her long-term goals of becoming a doctor. Her faith in God also maintains her success.
Khyler stated that her “growing relationship with Him [God] allows me to maintain success and the desire to be successful.” Mentors, or people who are upperclassmen in college who she calls “big sisters” or “big brothers” have also helped her with challenges. Khyler’s challenges to her success included her large course load of 19 credit hours, time management, living arrangements with her roommate because she at times would want to pull all-nighters studying but she did not want to interrupt her roommate sleeping. Khyler had a desire to be involved with campus activities, but because she lived in a residence hall that was the farthest away from campus, it influenced her level of involvement. Finally, Khyler stated maintaining her “sense of self, staying true to who you are,” is a challenge in college as well. She concluded saying “there are so many things going on, so many things that you can get involved in. So many things that you shouldn't get involved in. And you have to have the mental stability to say no to different types of things and stay on top of things.”

**Khyler Keaton**

I am a special butterfly, a go-getter, and a dreamer.

I am a part of a loving and successful family and from a small big city.

I am successful with the help of persistent, mindful, loving constant words of encouragement.

I am a beanstalk, it keeps growing, massive, abnormal, and fruitful.

I am mother and grandmother. I am a set of second eyes, kind, and nice.

I am told to reach back and help people behind me and not be so focused on temporary happiness to keep working to stay focused so I can achieve long lasting happiness, and make mature decisions.

I am open minded, culturally competent.

I am a close-knit family in pizza, Black beans.
I am Black ItMoN University.

I will create an intersectional campus climate because

the world is made up of all different types of people.

Therefore, it’s important to be inclusive,

and as important as academics, or staying on top of your spiritual life.

I am Black and proud and my legacy is loud.

I will thrive, I will succeed, I will achieve, and nothing will stop me.

Sarah

Sarah is a 19-year old first year student from Indiana who grew up in a single parent household with her three sisters. Her most important identities are her race and gender, an African American woman. Sarah shared that her dad spent time in prison from the time she was five until she was 17 years old. She contributes her academic achievement to her mom always encouraging her to “make good grades.” She grew up in the church where her grandfather was the pastor, and her mother was a preacher’s kid. “I don’t really have a choice when it came to that.” Sarah loves to sing and joined the choir when she came to college. She grew up in a predominantly Black environment and experienced a contrast when she went to a predominantly white environment in college. She said:

I always had Black friends, Black teachers, Black coaches. So, it was really different. I wasn't a fan. I would get on social media and connect with my [another in-state HWI] friends and there's all these Black people and I was like "Oh my gosh. I want to be there." I'm from [a diverse hometown] so it was very diverse. I was definitely not, I was not here for the change.
Sarah’s challenge to success was an observation about her campus climate at ItMoN University not supporting the racially minoritized cultural centers on campus. She said, “[ItMoN University] does not advertise Latina cultural center, the Black culture center, LGBTQ. We have Native American, Asian; they do not advertise that at all. And people don't go there at all.” She continued providing examples of microaggressions and macro aggressions that reinforced systemic exclusion on her campus. One example related to a post that someone placed in a GroupMe of a flier on campus. Sarah shared what she thought about the flier:

It's okay to be white and that this campus is predominately white. It's obviously okay to be white (laughter). You don't have to tell me that but how come I don't see fliers that say, it's okay to be Black. It's okay to be Latino or just anything but like the fact that it says it's okay to be white, like obviously. I don't know, I just feel like people might not.

The thing about the flier is that we don't really know who put it up. Me personally, I feel like a white person put it up.

Another example that she felt was not handled equitably by ItMoN University is when an ItMoN University professor posted a Facebook picture as her Facebook profile picture wearing Blackface for Halloween. Sarah shared her opinion about the professor:

She like painted her face Black, she was pregnant, like she put something under her shirt. She had curly hair like an Afro. She was dressing up as a Black person for Halloween.

So obviously, this got out to the Black community and we were very upset about it. I mean, I get it. Like there is nothing that I could have done at that time, of course, I probably was not born yet. But ItMoN University didn't do anything about it. It's just like, oh, that's it. She's still teaching Bio and knowing it. Luckily for me, I did not have
her, but I don't know how students feel to see this professor right in front of me, knowing she did that. It makes me feel some type of way, personally. Like I said, I don't have her.

She describes college success as “being able to handle the challenges and obstacles that come with college, yet still being able to reach the end goal of graduating.” Sarah relies on her family, friends, choir director, people who are a part of the student led Bible study organization that she attends, and Black women empowerment organization advisor for support. Sarah shared the strategies that help her succeed as, “I'm a very, very organized person. I love to cross things off my to-do list to the point that once I cross it off, I make a new to-do list (laughter). So, I can cross off more things.” Her mother helps hold her accountable by checking on her, “My mom ... She used to ask me about grades all the time. You know but she doesn’t ask me about it as much anymore. So, but I would definitely say that she would help. Just to like, “Oh, you have any events coming up.” She attends study tables for her choir twice a week, for three hours, “they're not mandatory, but they're there. That definitely helps.” She also gains support from her academic coach that was assigned to her because of her being a recipient of a scholarship, her coach meets with her three times during the semester and provides weekly announcements about activities on campus. Sarah handles challenges to her success by praying through them and reflecting on other obstacles from the past that God has brought her through, she stated:

I'm glad I did grow up in church 'cause I do have something bigger to look up to and I know where my hope comes from you know. Just having that ... I've been through things before obviously, like my dad and stuff like that, so knowing that nothing can stay really permanent and if I can overcome this or just being at a PWI then I can do a lot of things.
Sarah

I am great.

I am part of a big family and a small hometown.

I am successful with the help of my choir.


I am rose. Red and pretty. I am my family and my friends.

I am loving and accepting. I am told to suffer now and reign later.

And just get half of college under my belt. I am an African American female.

Phenomenal woman. I am tightly knit in a Martin Luther King cake, sweet tea.

I am my grandparents’ pride, who told me to keep going.

I will create an accepting climate for people of all ethnicities.

Like Black ItMoN University, they all stick together and try to help everyone.

I am extraordinary and unexpected.

I will become legendary for my siblings.

Tammy

Tammy is a 19-year-old junior from New Jersey and raised in Nigeria with her mum, dad, two sisters in a “Christian household”. Her most important identities are “being Christian is #1.” She shared, “that often times are stereotyped for being judgmental and intolerant, that's not all of us, obviously. I know so many who are not like that.” The other identity that is important to her is her race, “a Black person. I say that because I don't ... say, ‘Black African,’ or, ‘Black American’…. because no matter where I go on this planet, I'm just a Black person….Black people are so similar, everywhere we go, on this planet.”
Reflecting on her upbringing, Tammy conveyed, “in Nigeria, we like to say that it takes a community to raise a child, and I do not know a society where that is literally more true.” She recalls people who she would call aunt and uncle, “they're not necessarily actually my blood relatives, but they took a part in raising me too.” She contributes her church community for having a significant influence on her development as a person, “They shaped who I am as a person. They shaped how I think, and how I act. So, my church community has always been number one.” Tammy shared how socioeconomic status influences her life. “I was living, basically an upper-middle class life until maybe 2013, 2014, so not too long ago honestly.” Tammy then shared how she freely traveled across the world since she was born and her socioeconomic status. “I’m not rolling around with millions of naira or dollars in my pocket, but I definitely knew my parents had money. So, I definitely knew growing up that okay, my dad could sort anything out, any problem I had out.”

She maintained relationships with her Mum and Dad, “Yeah ... My dad was ... important to me, as any parent would be important to your child, but I as much closer with my mum, because she was just involved in everything.” She shared how her mum helped her with school, even in PTA, homework, getting teachers to come help and that is what made her relationship with her Mum closer than with her Dad. She shared that when she was 16 years old, her Dad left, “so I wasn't as close to him anymore. I kind of went off on my own and was doing my own thing while I was confused; I was upset. I didn't know why my own parent would leave me.” She then developed a father and daughter relationship with her pastor who plays an instrumental role in her life. She came back to America in high school and lived in Georgia with her aunt, living with her aunt in Georgia motivated her to go far away for college. Tammy is actively involved in the African Student Association on her campus and lives on campus in a
residence hall. She also works to offset her bills and still adjusting to her life without the financial help from her father that she once had as support.

Tammy believes her campus climate allows students the capacity to be heard and you have to set yourself up to. She stated:

I think this campus definitely gives room to be heard. The thing is, sometimes you have to actually shout loud enough to be heard. You can't just talk, you need to be screaming most times. If you are a Black person on this campus, you definitely have to be screaming. We're on a campus where it's a majority white people so you have to be screaming from the top of your lungs.

She acknowledges that Black people on her campus have experienced issues and she believes it is important to empower yourself and keep an open mind. She explained the following:

I believe that to a certain level there is. You make it equal for yourself. You have to work that out on your own. You can't ... Sometimes not everything is solved through community. Sometimes you have to think about things on your own, and by yourself. Empower yourself. If you're not empowering yourself then I don't know who else is gonna empower you.

Overall, she views her interactions on campus positively and concluded by saying, “Being on this campus and knowing that I'm me and I am uniquely me makes me feel that I know that there's so much more ahead of me that surpasses even what's on this campus.” Tammy describes college success as the following, “being happy, content and satisfied about the hard work you have put into yourself and your college career if you didn't work hard but are content, you aren't successful. You have to have grit in your work.” Tammy's strategies
to succeed include her strong faith in God, motivation from her Mum, and thinking about other people who need her help. She summed up her strategy with these words:

Yes. That's my strategy to literally surviving and staying alert in college, is to think about somebody else and think about God too. Thinking about my Mum, she's somebody else ... thinking about somebody else who needs my help sooner or later, or even now ...

Yeah, I'm just thinking about somebody else, not myself.

Tammy’s circles of support include her Mum, pastor, best friends, friends on campus, and professors. She shared that they help her by:

Just being sane. College is hard and I'm in a society that I'm not familiar with. I'm in [a Midwest town]. There's a whole percentage of white people. It's easy to get lost here but I can call my Mum, I can call my pastor, I can call my friends, and I can just be sane, level headed, not forget where I am or who I am. Yes, I love that. All day every day.

When discussing challenges to her success, Tammy stated, “everything is because of my upbringing, which is unique to me,” and shared in conversation that she handles challenges with her faith, emotions, and perseverance. She said:

If there's a challenge to my college success, I'll pray about it. I'll cry about it, too, to be honest. I'll cry about it for maybe a few hours, and then I stand up, dust my ... whatever I have to dust, and just move on. If there's a problem, then I face it head on too. I first pray about it, then I cry about it, then I get up and try to fix whatever problem is, whatever challenge it is.
Tammy

I am beautiful.

I am a part of wild and from fun Nigerian Family.

I am successful with the help of loving smart,
helpful, rich Gucci, Chanel smell.

I am rose, fierce and very soft. I am Mum and Pastor. I am strict and fun.

I am intelligent and loved by God.

I am cultural, my food, language, and society, intense.

I am bright

in dining hall pizza sometimes it’s good, sometimes it’s gross and, white rise

I am wisdom enwrapped in fear.

I will create the African Student Association fun

For freedom for everybody.

I am truly myself helping someone else.

Raven

Raven is a 22-year old senior from Illinois and raised in a single parent household by her mom until she was seven, and then her dad moved in and shortly after he had a stroke when she was in the seventh grade. Raven grew up with three older brothers. Raven describes herself as shy and sensitive. Her race and gender are her most important identities; she shared:

Malcom X said, a Black woman is the most disrespected person in the country. I think about that all the time, trying to overcome my double handicap. If I'm not the only Black person in a room I'm the only female…. And I've had to deal with that since really the seventh grade. And I feel like I have to prove myself not only as a woman but as a
Black person. And there's so many things that I have to think about that other people don't. For example, my hair, if I'm in a professional setting is it okay to wear my natural hair? Like I shouldn't have to think about that. Or will people take my seriously because I'm a female…?

Raven has always been a high achieving student who attended diverse schools but was educated in “mostly white classes” because she took honors classes. She secured her college scholarship in the eighth grade and has been a part of the scholarship program network since then. She desired to attend a HBCU, and even after securing some funding for higher education, she said, “but finances are hard, so I had to do the best thing and go to [ItMoN University].” Raven views college success as “getting involved on campus networking, earning good grades, earning internships in college so that you can be prepared for after graduation.” Raven’s success is motivated by her relationship with her mom. Her mom pursued college at the age of 25 while raising two kids at the time. Raven shared how her mom further motivates her in college, she said, “I think if she can go to college with two kids, I can go to college with no kids.” She continued sharing about her mom, “If I had any questions, she would try her best to answer them. She didn't grow up with the best childhood, so she would always tell me…how she wants the best for me…that was kind of my motivator.” Raven’s example illustrates how she keeps her mother’s lived experience top of her mind as she succeeds in college. Raven also shared about organizations that influenced her the most. She participated in a Divine Nine mentoring program for high school students. She met her mentor through this program and said about her mentor, “She was just always there for me to answer questions or if I needed someone to talk to, she was there for me.” She was also a part of Upward Bound math and science.
When reflecting on her experiences at ItMoN University, Raven shared that “Black kids in our community don’t feel valued.” She offered an example:

We had a white supremacist on campus, well a well-known white supremacist, because there was a video that surfaced talking about how although he's racist, he's gonna wait until he gets into his career field. I think he wanted to be a doctor. So, if he's a doctor operating on Black patients he can do terrible things to them or not take their lives as seriously. And so, with that we had a couple Black students on campus who were saying that there was nobody that they could talk to. They had a protest one day but nothing really changed, and so they feel like all we do is talk but there's no real change going on.

In addition, Raven took issue that ItMoN University groups all students of color together:

The Asians, Hispanics and Black people, we're all just minorities and not individual groups or cultures. For example, we just had the multicultural center where they just group all the minorities together….And so, we don't like how they're not recognizing our differences. The only difference that they see is that we're not white. And so, we feel like we are not that valued they just do the bare minimum to make us feel accepted, and we can see that.

Her circles of support include her mom, older brothers, scholarship advisor and best friend from back home. Her mom shares advice and encourages her by saying, "Look, you are the head and not the tail, you can do anything you can do, like if I can do it you can do it type thing." Her on-campus scholarship advisor supports her by being a resource for campus opportunities when she needs to talk her scholarship advisor is available, and “they provide not only academic support but mental support as well.” Raven’s three brothers each provided a different type of support. Her oldest brother, “he’s the most laid back, thinks very logically,”
provides her advice on friendships or other issues. Her middle brother, “he’s like a nerd….now he works for [a major airline],” provides information about internships, and academics decisions. The third brother, she hangs out with him because “he’s the social butterfly.” She met her best friend in high school because they were in the same college preparatory academy and they encourage each other; Raven shared “if she's ever talking down to herself I gotta talk her out of things. If I'm talking down on myself, her snapping me out of it. Being able to vent to each other about similar things.” They both are in the same Sorority, and both are presidents of their Sorority chapters because they encouraged each other to run for office.

Raven described how being her on her campuses sometimes brings “challenges”. Raven is majoring in Science, Technology, Engineering, Math (STEM). Raven expressed that “most days I feel like a fish out of water” and feels that she is not connected to campus but does what she has to do, then “go home or go to the multicultural center to kind of feel like belonging again.” She continued in conversation:

Oh, some days are easier to deal with challenges than others. I'm also very sensitive, and so when I do take a setback it's kinda hard for me to bounce back sometimes. And so, I really have to give myself a pep talk to get myself through challenges or seek help. So, I realize that staying in my head isn't the best thing to do, so I have to actually start talking to people. If it's something that's related to the classroom or overcoming my self-doubt, I definitely talk to my friends. They're very good at motivating me or getting me out of that state or failure or I can't do it or stuff like that. So, when I do have a challenge, I vent to them and they're really good at helping me get back on the horse.
Her circles of support re-center her from her feelings of “self-doubt” and they help Raven navigate her challenges to success that include self-doubt, not feeling welcome, academic challenges, and delegating her student leadership responsibilities.

**Raven**

I am beautiful, Black, strong and intelligent.

I am a part of a loving, supportive, small and successful family.

And from a small, limiting and segregated home town.

I am successful with the help of encouragement, motivating, sincere heartbeat.

I am a sunflower, bright and standing tall. I am mother and best friend.

I am loving and pushing me forward. And funny and supportive and attentive.

I am the head and not the tail. And I am whatever I set my mind to.

I am powerful, Black, beautiful woman and young.

I am close, there for each other and deep roots in Kool-Aid, unseasoned chicken.

I am my Black teacher who made me fall in love with math.

I will create inclusive, open and encouraging environments.

An inclusive campus gives you a sense of belonging and how to overcome doubts.

I am my family roots, continuing tradition, overcoming adversities.

My success is financial freedom and paying it forward.

**Delilah**

Delilah is an 18-year-old first year from Indiana. Her most important identities are her race and gender as a Black woman. Reflecting on her upbringing, she said, “we were kind of poor and working class. Then my father…worked his way up, and then my parents divorced.” She went on to say, “after my parents divorced, it was two pretty different paths. My
father was pretty safe. My mother had a lot more trouble.” After the divorce, a custody battle ensued, “it was just messy, and it was dirty, we both got hurt a lot.” she shared that the custody battle hindered her relationship with her mom. She lived with her father and then when he remarried, her step-mom moved in, and her stepmother had “adjustment issues and emotional problems.” As the oldest sibling, Delilah was aware when family issues occurred.

Delilah felt prepared for her college transition, “academically it was fine. And even socially it was good too.” Throughout middle school, she was interested in reading autobiographies and interested in social issues, and when she got to college a lot of her classes and assigned readings oriented around social change and activism, and DIY politics which engaged her. She was placed in a resident hall room triple and lived in a living learning community focused on “building communities and social issues, gender and sexual identity, all kinds of social identities, including race and ethnicity, and socio-economic status.” In her second semester, she became involved with student organizations on campus, art council, Black Student Union, and the African Student Association. She shared the importance of her involvement:

That was a really big part of what was keeping me at that school because academically it was fine, but socially it was not a very good school to be a minority. Or it can be in the same class, so being part of organizations like that has really helped ground me and everything. I wish I had been more involved my first semester than I was.

Delilah shared the importance of why she joined the African Student Association, she said: to connect across communities especially because sometimes with the Black American community doesn’t always connect well with the African community, other minority groups….I
feel a lot of times when we have social issues, we go to try to White folks first, to try to find an ally rather than to each other tying allies for our issues.

Her example emphasizes her desire to be in community with her race and ethnic backgrounds.

Describing her campus climate, Delilah said:

I would describe my campus climate as pretty open….any thoughts or interest you want to express, there is a space for it somewhere, while acknowledging the freedom of expression does not always unify the campus climate, And while those spaces don't always necessarily link up or go together well as a unified body, it is out there, so kind of whatever you want to be good or bad.

She encourages herself with self-talk, she says to herself, “so we're gonna be fine, we're gonna make it here, we're gonna do well here. You got things to do, no time to be worrying and everything.” She views college success as academic achievement, learning about herself, maximizing opportunities, personal goals like publishing a novel and, or short stories. To accomplish these goals she implements time management, asking for help, and doing reflection that allows herself to evaluate herself honestly. In conversation, she said:

I gotta do better, honestly, but kind of making sure I manage my time right. Making sure I know what time of day work best for me. Knowing if it's a good day or a bad day or if I'm slacking today or the next day more than I should be. That's the major thing and I think actually, pausing and investing in my work…. I think it's really important to really understand yourself, because in academics of course you want to get A's, but also you kind of want to practice skills that you will be able to use later. So being able to time manage, being able to dial into your work properly, it's going to be something that you can use later, something that just generally means something.
Delilah’s circles of support include her father, professors, a friend from home, and high school teacher. Delilah shared:

My father is my primary emotional life motivator. He helps balance my perspectives, gives me life wisdom and pushes me to pursue the lofty. As far as a practical help, finding this or that program specific career questions, my professors are my main resources.

Delilah also reflected on an important high school teacher who inspired her:

…she was a really big influence on me. I see myself in different in the world because of her. She was so intelligent and knowledgeable about the world and was really for the people. I would say that she was one of my biggest supports for when it came to my goals of activism.

Delilah faces challenges to her college success by seeking advice “if it's something I'm unfamiliar” or she doesn’t know what she is doing, she says “I'm totally open to go asking somebody else. Even if I'm pretty sure what I should do, kind of for confirmation, what do you think, would you agree with this?” She relies on her parents or professor. She also relies on herself; she concluded:

I really try to focus on kind of pausing and talking for myself through that situation. So really acknowledging, alright you're not feeling it, but kind of getting that look in a mirror. Alright it's time to settle down, you're not feeling it but stay encouraged, stay up.

**Delilah**

I am human being. I am a part of an intimate family and from a big city.

I am successful with the help of wisdom, hardworking, balanced, firm.

I am a willow tree, rich with water. I am professors and father.
I am knowledgeable and grounded. I am able and intelligent.

I am a Black woman. I am complex, troubled, and motivated.

Am a sandwich, potpie. I am willing to share personal experience to help guide your own.

I will create a genuine campus climate in order to uplift those most in need of upliftment.

I am motivated in order to create a future, in order to reach back to communities that

I come from, and ensure the wellbeing of those who are marginalized.

Nevaeh

Nevaeh is a 25-year old in her fifth year of college and from Illinois. She was in foster care for a short period until her paternal mother’s family adopted her. She was one of seven on her father’s side. Her biological father was not involved in her life, and her grandmother raised her in a home that was “very old fashioned, very traditional, very strict rules.” For example, “Couldn't get off the porch until I was about 15. Had to be in the house before the street lights was on. Y'all don't need to be outside past 9 o'clock. Pretty much that was it.” She shared that it was challenging having older parents and experience “double standards,” given to her and her brother. She was “very outspoken.” She said that “I always was taught to speak my mind.” Sometimes that “backfired because I didn’t care if you were an adult, I would speak my mind.”

But then some teachers took an interest in her and mentored her, she shared:

I had some teachers just all through my high school, elementary school experience, I was able to just be that with them. It was nice to just see a familiar face like when you were in high school. Cause it is a little scary at first.

During her senior year of high school, she got pregnant and had her son, Kaden. Nevaeh shared after she had her son, she became closer with her grandma. “She kinda saw some of her mistakes of having me on such a tight leash that made me rebel and we just grew really, really
close and we just talk to each other all the time now.” She enrolled at a local university for the first few years of college while working. She was involved in student government, several other clubs and organizations for Black women. She later transferred to ItMoN University during the second semester of her junior year. She lived off campus, “at one point in time, I was taking two city buses, a coach bus and an Uber just to get to school.” Her family pushed her to persist, she shared, “Because in my family, it was like, there's no excuse of you having a child. It's not an excuse, you still have to go to school, you still got to work.” Nevaeh’s most important identities are her race and gender, a Black woman. She continued by saying:

I feel like it affects me every day. I feel like a lot of times people just don't realize how much race plays a role in your everyday life. Like everyone likes to be like, "Oh, race don't matter, race don't matter." But it really does when it comes down to it. Because when I go into a store, race matters. When I go apply for a loan, race matters. And even being seen by a doctor, they try to act like it's all, but my race matters.

Nevaeh’s response illustrates how one of her important identities is not only important to her but his magnified because of how she is marginalized and minoritized because of one of her identities, her race. She is aware of discrimination not only in the larger social environment but also on her campus, Nevaeh shared:

My campus climate, I would say is very biased. I've just noticed that certain policies are not always enforced to certain individuals on the campuses. So, when we had the whole situation with people leaving the Nazi pamphlets in the library, I felt like it was watered down, it really wasn't handled.

She continued providing examples of inequalities of behaviors that she witnesses on her campus related to creating an unwelcoming environment, and differential treatment. She continued:
A lot of people don't trust the faculty or the administration at this school. They don't trust that they're going to advocate for them, and they don't trust that they have their best interest at heart all the time. The school does do some things that promote unity and things like that, and we can't just forget those things, but also, there are a lot of things that are not being handled properly, which is very discouraging to a lot of people because they feel like their voices are not being heard.

Her example illuminates how her institution does “promote unity” but also there is opportunity to improve trust between faculty, administration with students.

Nevaeh describes college success as “learning new life long skills, gaining core skills, and developing friendships and leadership abilities. Learning not only in a classroom but outside as well.” She incorporates self-care, checking in on her “mental health” and “physical health” she said, “Because if I'm not there mentally and physically then I'm not gonna be able to succeed academically let alone have a social life or anything else like that.” She also makes sure that she stays connected “whether it's friends, family, organization members and things like at the church…. staying connected and verbalizing what you need from your support system that's there.” She also keeps an open mind and has benefited from learning from friends with diverse backgrounds, they taught me a lot of different things…. “You’re like, Oh, that's because my friend told me."

Nevaeh’s example highlights herself awareness of making sure she prioritizes her health, “staying connected” with her “support system” and keeping an “open mind” to learn from others. She also makes sure she stays motivated and held accountable by her networks. Nevaeh shared that her son “is one of my best motivation to succeed as well as my family.” She also shared that sorority sisters and close friends hold her accountable and push her to be her best
version of herself. She mentioned that her ex-boyfriend provides “blunt” honesty with her and supports her with encouragement. Nevaeh also shared how her church family has been an integral part of her spiritual growth as well.

Nevaeh encounters academic challenges, and transportation, childcare challenges that compete with her college success. She recalls one of those challenges:

One challenge was me passing my research methods class. Me, and math and trying to remember. So, math any trying to memorize all these different practices and how to put this stuff into SPSS. It was just not clicking for me. I'll get a lot of stuff confused and just not remembering. So, then I just have to find ways that work for me. She concluded by describing her persistence to never giving up until she succeeds. She ended up getting a B- in that course, “We passed it. We did what we set out to do and that’s it.”

Her example demonstrates herself awareness and determination “to find ways” to succeed.

**Nevaeh**

I am beautiful.

I am a part of a loyal family and from a resilient force.

I am successful with the help of my sisters devoted, determined, cheerful.

I am a rose, that grew from concrete. I am family and spiritual. I am unconditional and nurturing. I am unique and worthy. I am Black, powerful. I am overcoming in unseasoned chicken, sushi. I am my grandmother, who never lost hope.

I will create an all-inclusive loving nurturing environment.

So that everyone has a place and everyone’s place is valued.

I am a reflection of my trials and tribulations that have made me stronger and better today.
Without my success, my son wouldn’t have a hero today.

**Jayde**

Jayde is a 21-year old junior from Kansas. She was one of seven children but only grew up with three of them in the house. She is in the process of making meaning of her shifting social class. She talked about a recent time her parents took her shopping:

…[they] got me a bunch of stuff that I needed. And I don't mean like off brand type stuff. I mean like the on brand, like Dove, Target brands, all those things. Right. I'm not used to that. I'm used to like, "Okay, you need something? Well, you probably can't get it because we don't have the money for that right now." So, that's how I grew up pretty much up until I'd say I was a sophomore in high school, and then that's when our finances changed. We started to get a lot, of the things that we wanted, or you know…

Jayde’s example emphasizes how her socioeconomic status influenced the way she moved through the world. Her reflection demonstrates the financial restrictions that she experienced growing up due to her parent’s prior financial condition.

During high school, Jayde was active in extracurricular activities that helped to develop her leadership qualities. She was very active in high school in ROTC, Marine Corps Junior ROTC for three years, became a sergeant. She said she “got to train with Marines for two years in a row” at “Paris Island.” and that experience helped her “develop [her] leadership qualities” and “figuring out what it means and what is acceptable as a woman, what isn't acceptable as a woman.” She continued saying “because these institutions of the military, who most times are very misogynistic and sexist spaces.”

Reflecting on high school now she realizes that she suppressed her sexuality during high school after witnessing what she called “closet trauma.” She shared, “I would see other people
come out of the closet and see how other people react to that, and that would be like, Okay, never mind, I’m not going to come out. I’m just going to stay in the closet.” Jayde shared that her most important identities included “first being my Blackness, second being my queerness, and the third being my anxiety and depression.” She continues sharing how being Black is a significant part of her identity, and her parents informed her “who I am and what that means in this world.” Her Blackness is so central to her identity that she created a “melanin corner” in her residence hall to be in community with other Black women. She even recruited Black women on campus to come live in her residence hall. However, interacting with the larger Black community on campus has been challenging for her, and Jayde was “hurt” when the Black community did not embrace her. But she has connected with friend groups that connect with her queer identity. She shared that her queerness is “near and dear” to her because she hid it for so long but is in a place where she “can let that out and let the flag fly completely. And not be ashamed of it.” However, she still hides that identity from her father because she witnessed his negative reaction towards her older sibling who came out as gay.

Mental health is also a part of Jayde’s identity that influences her lived experience on her campus.
After reflecting on her other two identities, Jayde said, “lastly, my anxiety and depression because she follows me everywhere (laughter), literally everywhere. I always have anxiety.” Jayde has not been diagnosed but believes she shares similar symptoms that her friends who received diagnoses related to anxiety and depression experience. She illustrated how her parent Christianity conflicts with two of her identities, queerness, and her mental health. Jayde said:
They'd always just be like, Uh pray about it, pray about it….Don't claim that over your life. …. You don't have anxiety. And so, that was conflicting too, it's like, Okay, so do I have anxiety? Am I just tripping?" or like, Is there something actually, wrong with me? My parents always made me believe, "No, you're just tripping. Just pray about it." And so, when I got here, and I had different friends and people in my life who actually struggled with this, and they would tell me they were very radical in their honesty. “This is what you have. Stop denying it and get some help. It's okay." And so when they would do that, I'd be like, "Okay, okay." And so that's something that I have. It's helped me to identify it, which is why a lot of times I say 'she,' because I feel like she's very much a 'she,' but all the time I'm just like, "Oh, that's just my anxiety. I have to acknowledge it now." Because before, not acknowledging it, didn't help at all.

Although her parent's Christian identity conflicts with two of her essential identities, her parents are a part of her support circle. However, her connections with her friends help to offset the deficiency of full support of her Queer and mental health identities. Jayde also has mentors who are her professors and immediate friend group are also a part of her circles of support.

Jayde is a student leader on her campus and enjoys educating campus community members about diversity issues and sexual assault. She finds it challenging when her peers who she teaches during training, engage in sexual violence behaviors on campus. She has built strong relationships with her professors on campus by speaking with them about multiple subjects. Reflecting on her campus climate, Jayde described her campus climate to be “difficult in the ways of hard to access the administration….I've witnessed that the administration isn't that easy to talk to or they're very elitist, if you do get access to them.” However, the standpoint of “meeting teacher and professors and things like that, I'd say from my experience, at least, I think
the professors are actually some of the best people on campus. She explains how they “have been very willing to help with anything…. So they, a lot of times, they put their money where their mouth is.” She describes the local community surrounding ItMoN University as “very supportive of campus, and the students that go here, regardless of what we're doing.” She said that the community participates in democracy.

Jayde describes college success as, “Success means to have a sound mind, as well as developing yourself from an intellectual standpoint. A sound mind to me means having your mental health be at the center of your education. Jayde implements being intentional with her time, and practicing self-care, “I have scheduled times with, this is when you're going to study, you don't need to study passed this point, take care of yourself.” She shared that homework always creates anxiety, so she builds in recovery time. Being vulnerable and acknowledging, “I'm not okay,” and letting people know what she needs. Jayde uses all resources around her, trying to maintain a positive outlook, and meeting new people. In addition to anxiety, she shared that “existential conversations…. about like, college ….is it really worth it?” or thinking about her grades creates challenges for her success.

Jayde

I am Black, Queer, and amazing.
I am a part of warriors and from desolation.
I am successful with the help of vulnerability and radical honesty, brave, ambitious, breath of fresh air.
I am a blossoming rose, full of hope and passion
I am my mentors and my closes friends.
I am extremely intellectual and caring.
I am determined to succeed and always using my past to inform my future.

I am complexed, beautifully intricate.

I am unkempt, radical, and disruptive in sparkling water, a bland extravagant cake.

I am my friend with pink hair who told me sometimes we have to do things we don’t like that are good for us.

I will create a campus climate that is inclusive and doesn’t overlook a single identity.

An inclusive campus makes everyone attending feel just as special and important as the next person.

I am my identities, they influence the ways in which walk and perceive life around me.

All I want to do is make my people proud is my success.

These vignettes demonstrate a diverse representation of these 15 African American women. Some of their narratives may be similar in how they experience the world, but their backgrounds inform their own distinct meaning-making of success and their multiple identities. The findings provide further insight into how they succeed on their campuses.

Research Findings

In this section, I discuss the findings of the dissertation, including those in direct response to the research questions and additional findings outside the direct scope of the research questions. The thick, rich qualitative data provided by the 15 participants described above led me to identify what “success” means to African American women at HWIs and the strategies and systems of support that have facilitated their success at HWIs. The data illuminated findings
across three categories as they relate to my conceptual framework: (1) environmental influences; (2) networks; and (3) self. Each category includes themes that are directly connected to the data and relate to the theoretical underpinnings of this study.

**Environmental Influences**

The first category focuses on environmental influences that directly or indirectly influenced African American women’s development and experiences. For this study, environmental influences include the broader climate and campus climate, as well as the socio-political influences of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and other discrimination against African American women. Participants reported a wide range of chronosystem events that influenced them, such as the murder of Trayvon Martin and other African American men, women, and trans folx; political elections; sexual assault; and national movements, such as Black Lives Matter and the 9/11 tragedy. African American women’s macrosystem influences included mass media and social media that create cultural ideologies and narratives about African American women. For example, participants shared how African American women are portrayed in media as “ghetto” and other negative stereotypes that portray them as one dimensional and erodes seeing Africa American women in a positive light. In this section, I discuss two themes of environmental influences to illustrate the complex ecological systems of the African American women at HWIs in this study. The themes include: (1) Paradoxical Climates and (2) White Supremacist Gaze.
**Paradoxical Climates.**

Participants in this study experienced their campus and local community climates as paradoxical; participants held multiple truths about their climates simultaneously, including ways they experienced the white supremacist gaze and ways they felt valued as Black women on campus. For example, a positive campus climate included Alex Lee’s perspective, “It's a very good campus climate….because students very much are listened to…. anyone's political view is accepted, and that's encouraged.” Some participants also shared campus climates were both inclusive and exclusive. For example, when I asked Ashley what she would change about her campus climate, she shared:

I would bring the communities closer together because it seems like on my campus there is a Black community, there's an international student community, and then there is everyone else. And then on another level within those communities there is the Black Greek life and then there is all the other Black kids and then I don't know how to speak on Greek life on other communities, but then there is Greek life as a whole on campus and then everybody else. I feel like those communities should just merge together and be like, "We're all here on this campus." Or even within the communities, not having served communities. Not even Black and Greek or just Black, bring it together and just all do something together instead of having this hierarchies.

Ashely’s example illustrates that there is an environment of inclusivity among racial and Greek identity communities, but also there is an exclusivity that creates “hierarchies” which suggest power within the campus climate.

When reflecting on the black community on campus, Jayde’s description was not an inclusive portrayal. She said:
But students, like the students that look like me, I personally don't feel any community there. Ummm, it's hard for me to find that community within my own black community here. Because of the fact that black people at [ItMoN University] are something else. I don't know. I don't get it. It's been very hard for me to mesh with them. It's like I'll come up, they'll be like ... I'll meet them a bunch of different times and every single time they'll be like, "What's your name? Hi how are you, what's your name?" Even though I've introduced myself to you multiple times. You know my name at this point. Or I'll get looked at like I don't exist.

Jayde’s contribution exemplifies that a single environment has the potential to offer both alienation and and barriers exist in concert from multiple stakeholders, including the Black community that influence the development of African American women on college campuses. Jayde doesn’t “feel any community” within the Black student community and she doesn’t “get it.” Her experience points to a desire for acceptance in the Black community and frustration at the way she has not been welcomed.

Ella described another example that relates to this theme by describing distinctions between two “sides” of her campus. She said:

If I'm on West campus, wonderful. Very open inclusive, understanding, diverse. Mainly because West campus has the least like costly housing. So, there are more people of color on this side of campus, because a lot of us come from lower income families. With that being said, on East campus, that where a lot of the racist white students are. A lot of the pompous, rich students are. A lot of the trust fund babies are. So, by that campus climate, is either very liberal in the way that it's ignorant type of liberal or very openly racist. Also the frat boy houses are on that side of campus. So, it's like that very misogynistic like that
type of deal where when I go there, when I have to go to that side of campus, I know that
I'm going to get into a debate.

Ella’s discussion of ItMoN shows the ways a single campus is comprised of different subcultures
simultaneously and how those environments create negative and positive outcomes. Ella’s
description of East campus points towards capitalism, racism, and misogyny, all of which create
a negative climate on her campus. Other participants described negative characteristics of their
campus environment which propelled them to have the desire to transfer to other institutions to
pursue their education. Sarah contrasted her high school environment with her college
environment and noted that the lack of Black people on her campus made her want to transfer to
another institution that had more Black students on campus. However, as Sarah reflected on her
success she demonstrated perseverance. She said:

... obviously I did think about transferring. I do have to deal with not seeing people who
look like me on a daily basis for four years and just like having to go through that. Or
definitely my freshman year, not really knowing who to talk to. The fact that I went
through all these things and I still got this degree, I'm literally setting my life up. Other
people don't have the same story as me, 'cause white people can't say they had to go to a
university with people who didn't look like them. They didn't have to experience that at
all.

Sarah also shared how she was able to build relationships with other African Americans on
campus. Her example emphasizes her will to persist towards her college degree and overcoming
her initial feeling to transfer.

Mia shared her thoughts about her university’s environment; she said:
like they literally just do not care. This school ... everything is run on a money business. If it's not money, they don't want to hear it and they don't care, they'll come back to you. If you're black, you're white, yellow, pink, red, they don't care. They don't care. So, if I were to do college all over again, I would most definitely not be at this school. Like I even tried to transfer last year.

Mia shared that despite her feelings wanting to transfer she believes her university is where she is suppose to be, She said, I had the opportunity to transfer, it didn’t work out so that must mean I’m supposed to be here. If I wasn't here, I wouldn't have met my boyfriend so there's that. My friends, I wouldn't have them if I wasn't here. My experience isn't bad. I'm blessed, grateful that I'm even getting an education because not a lot of people get them.

Sarah and Mia’s examples illustrate their desires to transfer to other institutions; yet, indicates their willingness to succeed and changing the way they viewed their experience as negatives to positive outcomes. Other African American women experience their HWI campuses as “isolated,” yet feel belonging in a small group on campus. For example, Gabby shared:

    I think that being me on campus feels lonely and isolated, except for those times where I'm with the sub-group of African American students that I typically engage with, or that I'm in registered student organizations with them, like Word. Other than that, just walking around and going to class, I don't really feel a part of the community. I feel separate.

Gabby did not explicitly identify or discuss white supremacy, yet her feelings of loneliness, isolation, and separation point to an environment where she does not feel a general sense of belonging. Other students were more explicit about the white supremacist gaze, the next theme.
White Supremacist Gaze.

The white supremacist gaze influenced the African American women in this study before and during college, with some participants making meaning of their campus experiences alongside their pre-college experiences. For example, Sarah’s high school senior trip to the U.S. Presidential inauguration of Donald Trump informed her initial experiences of the predominance of whiteness on her campus. Seven months before Sarah’s freshman year, her senior class visited Washington, D.C., a trip they had planned prior to the announcement of the election results. Sarah expressed how she felt on the trip, she said:

I actually did go to Trump's inauguration my senior of high school. As far as being comfortable, that was probably one of the most uncomfortable places I could've ever been. Because I paid for the trip regardless of ... I didn't know who was gonna win. It was definitely, definitely ... definitely different. I remember I cried, actually. It was just weird because I knew that the people surrounding me, they might not have been for me. I mean they supported Trump and ... What he brought to the table and, I knew that in some aspects, Trump did not support me. And all these people support him and so I'm like, "Oh my gosh." .... I was crying, so I called my mom and I was just like, "Oh my gosh. I'm the only Black person here." Like even in the crowd. I don't know. I was just really sad.... just saw everybody and they're wearing the MAGA hats and I'm just like, oh my gosh. Like, wow. This is another part of America that I don't see. I don't see this every day.

Sarah continued sharing about how she was able to find the positive in her senior trip with the support of her aunt, she explained what her aunt told her, Sarah said, “ She told me not to look at it as me celebrating Trump and saying congratulations, but she told me to look at it as saying farewell to the first African-American President and first lady. So, that's the way I looked at it.”
Sarah then contrasted her high school senior trip with when she came to ItMon University. She said:

I did not see any Black people at all. It was insane. I guess I thought ... I don't know why I thought I would see anyone. But I just did not. I guess coming to ItMon University ... It was almost like a flashback, honestly a flashback from seeing a lot of white people at the inauguration. Because that's legit all that I'm surrounded by. So, when I came in and I was in the classroom, it was like the same thing. I was like, "Okay." I was uncomfortable at the inauguration in DC, so I was uncomfortable in my classroom, too, in [the city that Sarah’s university is located].

Sarah’s example emphasizes how the broader political climate informed her experience on and off campus. Being in the environment at the inauguration she saw visible and invisible indicators that “might not have been for [her],” meaning supporting her identities because of what Trump “brought to the table.” Sarah was speaking about her identities as an African American woman and the racist ideologies that Trump conveyed on a political platform.

During the early stages of African American women’s lives societal messages convey their societal value. For example, Delilah reflected on trying to make meaning of race and racism as an eighth grader:

…the first aspect of my identity that I was kind of awaken to, black identity. In eighth grade, I had a teacher that was racist, that was kind of around the time that Trayvon Martin case and so he expressed his views that were kind of you know essentially blaming Trayvon, and he talked a lot about race in his class he talked about his Black wife and how that made him not racist to have one despite expressing a lot of views that were questionable to talk about a lot. And since we were in eighth grade, we didn’t really
know how to respond to race issues. Because like my dad he would say things like
"Don't do that, and I am not going to do that, and black men need to watch out for this,
and black women look out like that.” But you know, it doesn't really hit you until your
actually older and in a situation like that. So that was kind of the first time, and also
around the time that I was reading Revolutionary Suicide and so that was like the first
identity that I got awaken to and so it’s been very foundational to how I look at myself
and what I inspire to do with my life and how that coincided with that part of my
development.

Delilah’s retelling of this experience represents how racist and patriarchal ideologies influence
the development of African American women at a young age. Her eighth-grade teacher’s
disparaging comments about the murder of African American teenager Trayvon Martin provided
an example of how white supremacy operates; the white teacher believed he was incapable of
being racist because his wife was Black. Delilah’s discussion of not knowing how to respond as
an eighth grader, then recalling messages from her father and literature, point to the importance
of counter-narrative to the white supremacist gaze. Delilah went on to leverage her negative
childhood experiences of the white supremacist gaze towards engaging in social activism as a
young adult.

For Alex Lee, who is Muslim, the white supremacist gaze manifested in other ways. She
shared an example about being a Muslim woman in U.S. society:

I remember anytime anyone said anything about bombs, since of like 9/11, that made me
so uncomfortable, because people would look at me. And so, any little thing. Any little
thing just made me feel like Oh my gosh, I'm such an outcast.
The events of 9/11, which gained global attention, produced political hysteria against Islamic people, and validated Islamophobic ideologies. As an enactment of the white supremacist gaze, Islamophobic ideologies communicated to society that individuals who are Muslim are a threat to white culture, instilling fear and uncertainty in people’s hearts and minds.

The white supremacist gaze also operated in participants’ lives through the reproduction of stereotypes, including from white people with whom students had trusting relationships. Sarah, for example, described an interaction with her family physician after her acceptance to ItMoN University:

When I told my doctor that I was coming to [ItMoN University], instead of saying congratulations, he actually said, "Well, how did that happen?" And I was very like ...

"How else? I applied and I got in just like anybody else.” And it made me feel like ... My mom was so upset. This is the doctor that I had my entire life and my family has had and everything. It made me feel like people ... I just feel like white people think that Black people need some type of help to get to where they are. Like they just had to have someone's assistance to be successful. Like they didn't get it on their own. And that's not the case.

In Sarah’s example, her family’s lifelong White physician reinforced inferiority stereotypes, which are a tool of white supremacy to label and devalue the academic achievements of African Americans while perpetuating the myth of inferiority. Specifically questioning how she got into ItMoN University reinforced to Sarah the exclusionary historical foundations of higher education.

African American women in this study have also experienced white supremacist gaze as capitalism relative to their college education. For example, Nevaeh said, “To me, it’s all about
finances and money and gains with the university, which is not logical to me, because you're just letting people know that as long as you have certain resources that the rules don't apply to you.” She felt the institution prioritized and reinforced capitalism in the distribution of resources, maintaining a system of haves and have nots at ItMoN.

Tensions between environments also illuminated white supremacist gaze. Mia described the influence of the geographic region on the campus racial climate, while Ella pointed to tensions between different areas of her campus. Mia said her experience of campus climate was “a load of bullshit.” She went on to explain what that meant to her:

That's literally just off the top, the first thing that comes to mind. Now because [ItMoN University] is in [City, State], which is right near KKK land and so it's very like racially tense outside of [ItMoN], and then even at the university because we're in college it's a little bit more liberal but for the most part it's just as bad as it is outside of campus. Very divided. It's like Black [ItMoN University] and then the rest of [ItMoN University]. It's very separated.

Mia’s experiences exemplify a campus where African American women may feel separate from the larger demographic, not feeling valued on their campus, or that their campus administration cares about them on their campus. Her response also points to inconsistency between administrative verbalization and administrative action of creating a diverse campus climate about diversity and their action to address behaviors that do not align with their institutional mission.

White supremacist gaze also perpetuates a one-dimensional narrative of African American people. Nevaeh described the lack of support at her university displayed during Black History Month, she said:
The small population of African Americans on campus, because we're less than five percent. Sometimes it feels like because we are such a small demographic, that we don't matter. Also, Native Americans and things like that are hurt, they'll complain….Not the Caucasian students, but a lot of the other students feel like their needs are not being met. They are not seen as a priority for the university, and that, although they try to do some of these programs, and like ... There was some program about a basketball game, or something like that, and in the last minute they invite NPHC to come, but we're only invited to things to be entertained and that's disrespectful because it’s like, "Why do you only invite us to things because you want us to step or you want us to stroll, or you want us to put on a performance for you." But, if you're going to have a basketball tournament, you've got to think sometimes about the ramifications of saying you’re having a basketball tournament for Black History Month. I just wanted to figure out why a basketball game? What does that celebrate with Black history?....I felt like it should have been probably run through a few other people because if you already had this plan, why do you wait a few days, a week before the event to invite NPHC to be like, "Oh, well, you guys could come." I'm sorry, I have few questions. Why is it a basketball game for Black History Month, or it's supposed to be for appreciation, why is a basketball game appreciation? You need to look at the context that you put that in, and analyze that a little bit more, because it's stereotypical for you to say that a basketball game is a Black History Month appreciation. That's not appreciation to me. Why is it appreciation? Is there going to be some type of presentation and show all the accomplishments that Black inventors, artists? What is the appreciation part, because if you're saying that the basketball is the appreciation, I don't get it. I just didn't put two and two together for that.
I just don't feel like sometimes they think things through all the way and think of the sensitivity that some people may have, or they don't think to put as much effort in to it. Nevaeh’s narrative demonstrate how the white supremacist gaze is utilized to limit the depth of African American people. Solely celebrating Black History Month with a basketball game without “some presentation and [displaying] the accomplishments that Black inventors, artists,[or other Black leaders]” have accomplished restrains counternarratives of African American people by perpetuating a stereotype that displays a one-dimensional viewpoint, in this case being good at playing a sport, basketball. Also, the lack of planning conveys a message of who the institution prioritizes. For example, Nevaeh shared that the National Pan-Hellenic Council, historically African American Greek organizations were “only invited to things [so the majority at her school, white people could] be entertained,” Nevaeh viewed this act as “disrespectful.” Furthermore, her example illuminates the consequence of not planning with intention. Nevaeh perceived the attempt of receiving an invite close to the event as an afterthought, last minute planning that did not have time to be adequately vetted.

Similarly, Sarah described her experience of singing in a predominantly Black Choir and how she observed the mostly white choir, ItMonettes, getting more acknowledgment and opportunities to sing at public events on campus and internationally. She described a time when the ItMonettes invited her choir to sing at their event which was appreciated but explained there is a lack of university support. Sarah said:

I don't know if [the college president] has ever been to an ItMon [Black Cultural Center’s student choir], performance ever. I haven't seen him there, but I don't know. The provost, he did introduce us for the first time recently last semester. And then recently, a couple of weeks ago, he introduced us at the [Big Ten academic conference]. But he did recently
introduce us. And yeah, that's a big deal but how many of them actually come to our performances? I don't really know. So, like I said, I just don't think that like people don't take us seriously…. They don't really advertise about us at all. And they don't really come to our events like that on campus. I know that it's predominately white and we do get a few white people, but I don't know. I just feel like white people should give us way more credit you know and others as well. To even feel like, hey, this is what we're doing on campus. But, yeah I don't know, I guess that the climate is a little, they don't really pay attention to us. Like I said, I gave a presentation about the ensembles in my COMM class. I talked about all of them and then afterwards, no questions at all. Like nobody had questions for me. I just sat down. I don't think that they care very much.

This example demonstrates how Sarah viewed her institution’s preferential treatment of the white choir over the predominantly Black choir that she performs with on campus. Her observation of the inequality of opportunities presented to the white choir and administrative acknowledgment connects to the white supremacist gaze because of the disparity of treatment and the centering of whiteness.

Some participants in this study internalized the white supremacist gaze. One example is demonstrated in Tammy’s description of her campus climate as the following:

Honestly, I don't even think anything at this campus climate.... I'll give an example.

Every Black person wants their voice on this campus to be heard, but what are you actually saying on campus that you want to be heard? If you're not saying anything then I don't know why you want to be heard. I think this campus definitely gives room to be heard. The thing is, sometimes you have to actually shout loud enough to be heard. You can't just talk, you need to be screaming most times. If you are a Black person on this

campus, you definitely have to be screaming. We're on a campus where it's a majority
white people so you have to be screaming from the top of your lungs.

Tammy’s example emphasizes the extra effort that “if you are a Black person on [her] campus, you definitely have to be screaming,” to be heard. Under a white supremacist gaze, Black students have to give extra effort to be heard. Screaming exhorts additional energy that expresses maximum emotion or pain (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019). She continues explaining that the onus is on Black people if they “wanna make [themselves] seen on this campus.” She said:

And it should be “something that’s worth being seen for.” My stance on that is if you have something to say, if you wanna make yourself seen on this campus then you have to do something that makes people wanna see you. You have to do something that's worth being seen for. If you're not doing anything that's worth being seen, then that's on you. Don't be shouting, "Oh my god, I have a problem. Nobody wants to see my problem. Black people don't have a voice." I'm like, "Okay. What are you even saying that Black people ... What have you said? You haven't said anything so go sit down somewhere else."

Tammy interviewed two Black women students for a campus journal article, and the two women shared that they perceived the campus environment as unwelcoming which is contrary to Tammy’s experience. She shared when someone asks if she has a voice on campus Tammy remains on “neutral ground” because she believes you must “make it equal for yourself.” Her comments further reinforce the internalization of white supremacist gaze by placing the responsibility on African American students to make themselves seen but also have something worthy to be said. On the one hand, Tammy demonstrates her agency to create a campus climate that is conducive for herself. Conversely, Tammy's response offers one example of how white
supremacist gaze acts as a governor over perceiving who on campus has “something that's worth being seen for,” and have “something worthy to be said.” Tammy’s response shifts the responsibility of the institution onto the Black students.

The environmental influences described through the themes of paradoxical climates and white supremacist gaze illustrate the pressures – good and bad, supportive and oppressive – on African American women at HWIs. With these influences comprising the outermost levels of African American women’s ecological systems, in which all other systems are nested, I now turn to the next level of influences, students’ networks.

Networks

The second category, networks, focuses on the people that have supported participants toward their success on or off campus. The African American women in this study clarified that networks are critical to their success and discussed myriad networks, including family, peers, instructors/faculty, advisors, supervisors, choir directors, romantic partners. Some of these relationships were built strategically as pathways toward success during or after college. I made meaning of these data within three themes: (1) “Melanin Corner” (2) Circles of Support: "Second Set of Eyes" and (3) Building Strategic Networks.

“Melanin Corner”.

The first theme, “Melanin Corner” demonstrates discussion from participants that focused on the importance of the Black community on their campuses. The desire to connect with African American peers inside and outside of the classroom was evident throughout the data. Some participants sought acceptance as well as connection with their African American peers. Acceptance and belonging are important factors of African American women’s success,
and one network participants identified was what Jayde called, “melanin corner.” Jayde expressed her frustration of living with white women, she said:

When my hair started to naturally start doing its own thing, they'd be like, "Oh, your hair is, Wow. How do you do these things? and I'm like, "I, I'm, okay." I just wouldn't even put my energy into it. Or, I walked around with a bonnet on and they'd be like, "What is that? Oh my God." Or look at me like I'm some type of museum artifacts. And I hated it. I hated it. I was like, "I can't do this." So, the year after, I specifically made sure that I have, I call it my melanin corner…. I need to have a melanin corner, where there would be no roommates in their to judge my hair, judge what I'm doing as a black female, anything like that. And that's exactly what I did. I got a room full of black women and we do our own thing, and we wear bonnets whenever we want to, and we talk about things that like matter to black females, like things I matter to black people.

The melanin corner captures participants’ narratives that center around the importance of the African American community on their campuses. While not all participants felt accepted in the African American community on their campuses, they did all seek out the African American community. Many of the participants discussed how the African American community was critical towards shaping their college experience. Participants talked about creating a community amongst African American peer groups, African American instructors, or People of Color to support their identities and interests on their campuses. Khyler reflected on what changed between high school and college, she shared, “I definitely leaned on the Black community a little bit more and more freely than I would have in high school, just because there's more of us here, more African Americans here than there was in my high school,” she also described the African American community “a little bit more sense of family.” Khyler example emphasizes the
interconnectedness of the African American community at her institution. Mia described her desire for a Black roommate as a compromise for not being able to attend a HBCU. She said, “I had a Black roommate, so I felt like I was still getting a little piece of my HBCU that I wanted.” Raven was also strategic in wanting to live with a Black roommate. She said:

I didn't want a white roommate because I didn't want them to ask questions about my hair or other ridiculous questions. So, rooming with someone I know made it easier for me to go to a mostly white school because we could talk about Black things.

These examples emphasize African American women’s desire for being in community and around people who shared their gender and racial identities. Other participants talked about their campus Black Cultural Center or LLC, classmates or floormates who were also People of Color who became close friends, and the comfort associated with the melanin corner.

**Circles of Support: “Second Set of Eyes.”**

This theme delineates and discusses the multiple networks that African American women accessed while succeeding at HWIs. These networks included family, peers, staff, faculty, friends, partners, advisors, and other people from back home. In this section, I discuss the ways participants felt supported by their networks toward their success.

Students’ support networks served a variety of purposes for African American women in this study – from listening to providing feedback, from teaching to facilitating introspection. Participants leaned on their networks during times of struggle and times of celebration. Halima described her support networks as “circles” and explained that she employs her support networks purposefully. She said,

I feel like they provide a backbone for me. And so, if I'm feeling discouraged or disappointed, there's not just one person that I can go to. I have help from multiple people
who are there for me all the time. They're here to see me succeed and they're also not afraid to tell me if I'm doing something wrong. I guess they just provide a backbone for me. They provide a network I can fall back on, I guess.

Hannah described her support circles as a place to process what’s happening in her life. She shared:

I'm just leaning back on my support system. I like to talk my feelings out. I like to talk to people and vent. By venting, I'm able to hear myself out, and then get their opinion on what I should do, and listen to myself talk, so then I'll get a different point of view from them. I'll just kind of talk to people about my problems and then see where that goes.

Circles of support can feel as strong as a “backbone” that African American women can trust and fall back on when needed while they pursue success in college. Circles of support also provide safety and a place to freely express their viewpoints without repercussion that would be detrimental to their success.

Many participants feel strongly supported by their families and home communities. Khyler discussed the way she feels her support network from home raised her collectively. She said:

…my whole family has just been really supportive, my grandma, grandpa, my nana, so just everybody around me and my Godmom. I feel like I really agree with the statement saying that a whole village can raise a child. I feel like all those people raised me, even like some of my mom's best friends. I was over at their house all the time and they had an influence in my personality and just the way I was successful as a human being…

When reflecting on opportunities that she was able to secure because of this network, Kyler shared:
It was my mom who put it in my face and was like, "Sign up. Just do it." And I signed up like two days before the deadline. So, it's things like that, that it's like a second set of eyes that is looking out for your success.

Khyler’s immediate and extended family had and continue to have a tremendous influence on her development. By experiencing life with “a second set of eyes,” Khyler felt her network looking out for her welfare in addition to her looking out for herself.

Hannah also discussed her family as a critical network. She said:

Getting into the groove of things, and the campus and school stuff, I didn't have anybody directly with me other than my family. So, they were my only option for a while and then they became my favorite option. But, once I did develop more support, like a network of other people, my family was my top choice to talk to. Because one, they're closer proximity. I go to see them on the weekends. And two, just because they've become a lot more understanding ever since I started college. There's just some things where you don't want to talk to other people about, like your cousin, just people who know you as a person. You don't want to start from scratch and tell someone else a whole entire story, whereas your cousin knows what's going on and they've been there for you since the beginning, or they've been with you since the beginning, experiencing the same things you are. So just not having to start from nothing and, just keeping them updated on a day to day basis, instead of finding one person to sit down for couple of hours to explain the story from the beginning, and then they're not gonna understand the whole context of the situation, it's just a whole thing. I'd rather talk to my family who knows what's going on.

Here, Hannah explained that her shared history with family keeps them as her “top choice to talk to” and saves her from having “to start from scratch” with newer networks. Similarly, Raven
shared about her family being a support network, when she shared how her career coaches, academic, assigned scholarship advisors helped her “develop strategy plans” and “technical skills,” but provide “cookie cutter” advice. Raven explained that the advice she gets from her mom and brothers is different than what she receives from her advisors. Speaking about her mom and older brothers, Raven said:

…because they’re all older than me, so they all experienced things before, so experience is the best teacher. So of course you can talk to your advisors but they will give you like the cookie cutter answers or you can talk to your family, who knows you a little better, knows how you think better and can give you a better reason why to do it.

Raven’s example demonstrates how she gains support from her advisors, but she expresses a distinction between her two support systems, her advisors and family. She learns from the “cookie cutter answers” that her advisors offer, however, her family can customize “better reason[s]” that help to guide her because they know her better. Both of these support circles help Raven to succeed during college, and her family support signifies the importance of familiarity with characteristics.

Peer support networks are another instrumental circle of support for African American women in this study. Many of the participants talked about relationships with friends (on campus and back home), classmates, sorority sisters, and other peers who helped them strive for success. Jayde’s described being able to talk with her friend network about deep life topics that she did not think she could talk to others about. She shared:

We've just talked about so many things and been so vulnerable with each other that we've had these wild experiences, super crazy experiences that I would never have with people who weren't as open minded and as willing to experience, I guess, because not a lot of
people in my life before were willing to do anything or willing to talk about radical ideas. That's been something so cool too. I normally can't talk to people about certain ideas or have a question about something that's kind of like a controversial question. Instead of being like, "Oh, you shouldn't ask that," or getting mad at me for asking that, my friends are like, "Okay, let's discuss this, let's talk about this. That's a really good question that you have. You don't seem to understand what you're talking about so let me just inform you." That's one of the best parts.

Jayde’s description of her friend network exemplifies the vulnerability she can have with this circle of peers while feeling supported in learning new ideas or exploring complex questions.

In contrast with the stability many women felt with their families as circles of support, peer circles were often described as less stable. For example, Luigi said:

….this is a lesson that I learned, but the friend groups that you have in college, I thought it was just going to be like, oh, once I meet someone in college, I'll be friends with them for life. But it's very much so semesterly friends, if that makes sense. So, it's like whoever you have class with, you're going to be friends with that semester. So, my freshman year, my first semester freshman year, I didn't know that at the time and I was like, oh, I'm going to be best friends with this girl named Jamie, and Jamie’s so cool. She was sarcastic like I am. She was beautiful, etc., but as you move around you have to love and let go of so many people so quickly. The friendships, their meaning starts to change because I've always had my group of friends in high school for all four years and we've been hanging out outside of that.

Luigi’s description emphasizes how peer support can be temporary, and this circle of support can change throughout college depending on who you meet throughout college. Experiencing
temporary friendships was a change for Luigi in contrast to her creating lasting friendships with her peer support network from high school.

Building peer networks in college classes has been important for Raven as well. She reflected:

If it's something classroom related, there are a couple friendships I've formulated and some of my colleagues that are helping me within the classrooms overcome those challenges. Two main colleagues/peers that have been helping me the most. The first one is a Hispanic female that I have known since high school, but we did not become friends until college and realized that we were taking the same courses. I met the second person through the first person. She is an extremely smart white female who helps us both and we’ve studied together for a lot of different courses. So, I guess the two biggest things are talking with people to help me overcome challenges.

Raven tackles academic challenges alongside two other non-African American women classmates who help her study and strive for success.

Participants also discussed instructors and faculty as a circle of support. Ella shared how the support of her professors helps her navigate and make meaning of oppressive environmental influences. She said:

[The state that the university is located in] is one of the top whitest states in the entire country. We even have had, especially on the floor, White people said the N-word to us, White people wear 'Make America Great Again' hats and be openly racist to us. And like, I personally put all of that into my writing, into essays. And I have the professors who actually who take interest like into what I write about, and are open to us having debates in class. And when I come to office hours, they allowed me to ask those critical questions
in the way that ... That's not allowed in Catholic School. Like, you shut up and you write your notes and you ... Whatever the teacher says is the right answer. But at university, it's here's the concept, do with it what you will. And make sure you're staying plugged in, and using your prior knowledge to help influence like how you see the toxin. This is a back and forth type of symbiotic relationship, in the way that high school wasn't for me, which is wonderful. I even go out and get coffee with my professors. Like, it's amazing.

Ella’s narrative illustrates the importance of how professors can connect with a student’s interests and affirm their identities. Her identity as a writer is not a surface level identity but one that is important to her core sense of self. The professors who developed a relationship with her created space for her to ask “critical questions” while accessing a sense of liberation to be her full self within this circle of support.

Jayde shared during her interview that some of her professors have become her mentors and keep her accountable. She said:

So, they'll always be in my face about, "Well, you didn't turn in an assignment. What's going on? Are you okay? What's happening to you?" That keeps me accountable but also is constantly pushing and pressing up against my comfort zone of navigating things for myself and being vulnerable and all that type of stuff.

Jayde’s statements emphasize the importance of accountability that this circle of support can offer to African American women. She expressed that they push her out of her comfort zone as she develops, and she can do so with a vulnerability that requires trust in her relationships with her professors.

Participants also discussed ItMoN University staff as circles of support, specifically academic advisors and student organization advisors. However, staff were also explicitly named
as potential sources of discouragement. For example, one participant reflected on the difference between her first and second academic advisors, as well as her TRIO advisor. Neveah, who is a student-parent, said:

My advisor was just saying that he just didn't think academically that I will be able to succeed. Because I think the first time in the fall when I dropped [the course load], they were saying I had to meet with my advisor to be able to register for the spring. That's when he was saying that. Then I dropped it and then I didn't even try to come back in the fall. I came back in the spring and then I had to meet with them again and I got the 'D' he was just like, "yeah, colleges may not be for you. It's not for everybody." Switched my major after that, after our second meeting went wrong cause we just kept having awful meetings with him. I switched to Psych and then I think everything was a little bit better then. Yeah, me and him only met twice because he had put me on probation and then I had never saw him. Then I had to get off of academic probation and I just had already switched my majors because I just didn't want to deal with him. He was just saying that he didn't think I would be able to succeed because I had the kid and my transportation issues and everything like that. The next advisor I had was just like, "well, what's the bus schedule, let me see the bus schedule, what time you gotta be out here? We can find you some classes. I can make it work." She was very supportive. I joined TRIO on campus as well and I had Katie and she was really helpful. She always believed in me and she always just was like, "whatever you need, I'm here. You need tutoring, I'm here, you need funding, I'm here. Anything you need, just come in and vent. I'm here." And I do like I'll come in there and vent about anything… That [first] advisor really sucked. I'm happy that I got a different advisor.
Nevaeh’s discussion of an advisor who “really sucked” and two others who made her feel supported exemplifies the power in relationships. Her first advisor was operating from a white supremacist gaze of only seeing her deficit and not her potential; he did not offer her resources or encourage her toward obtaining her goals. Her second advisor not only encouraged her but became a resource by reviewing the bus schedule with her and finding classes that would work with her parenting schedule. Her TRIO advisor also encouraged her by asking Neveah what she needed to succeed as a whole student and then being available to her.

Participants also reported advisors as people who helped to hold them accountable. Gabby shared that the advisor of her sorority, who is also an administrator, “pushes us to be the best version of ourselves.” The advisor challenges her and her chapter sisters with questions to hold them accountable. Gabby also felt her sorority advisor was available to her: “The most important thing about this network is, I know that she's only a phone call, or a walk into her office, away. She will make the time for me if I need it to just talk with her, meet with her.” Other participants could also rely on their advisors for advice; participants viewed advisors as “knowledgeable” and as offering alternative solutions to issues that the other members of their circles of support could not always offer. Alex Lee stated:

Because again, if stuff falls in the cracks, if I feel like I need more resources, if I'm changing my course. Let's say I'm like, "Oh, shoot, I don't want to be this anymore. What do I do?" You have these people who are knowledgeable and care and this is their job, who are dedicated to helping you and that's always so nice. Because if worse came to worse, and I'm freaking out and I, "Oh no, mom and dad, your tuition money, I feel like it's gone to waste because I don't want to be a biology major anymore." I have these
people who can calm me down and say, "No, no, no, that's okay. Here's an alternative solution that we can take." That's another support, and that's very important I feel like.

Together, these examples of African American women’s circles of support clarify the importance of having multiple and diverse relationships. While many of the circles of support described above were developed prior to college and developed organically at college, sometimes participants built strategic relationships once they arrived on campus. I now turn to that theme, building strategic networks.

**Building Strategic Networks.**

African American women in this study have built relationships strategically to enhance their college experiences and expand their networks. These relationships create opportunities to secure social capital, and vocational and volunteer experiences. For example, some participants built relationships with professors that helped them to gain access to job opportunities or recommendations for programs. Delilah shared:

> I have an English professor and she helps me a lot for recommendations for programs and this workshop Creative Writing class that I'm in. I'm actually doing an internship with that professor that she recommended me for, and I got into this 400-level writing class upon her recommendations.

Delilah’s description of her English professor highlights social capital that these students can access through their circles of support that helps them to excel. Social capital is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). Social capital is critical to the success of African American women, and they can access it through their membership in their circles of support.
In some examples, students have established relationships toward their careers after college. Ashley, for example, stated:

I would definitely say the relationships with professors and even other students on campus has been very important to me because I feel like that has changed my college experience because when I first was here my freshman year it was like, "I'm just here to get you all ready to go." Now, it's more so like, "I'm here to get this degree, but I'll miss it when I'm gone." These would be people that I know that I could always connect with if I needed a job or if they needed something, that we could still have these relationships.

That goes for the students and the professors.

Ashley’s example shows how building connections with a vocational focus during college can help expand her network and job prospects after college. Similarly, Mia shared the importance of building relationships to help her after college, and Khyler emphasized that she was intentional about building relationships with professors. She said, “I made it a pact to introduce myself to every professor that I had at the beginning of the school year. I had the best relationship with my calculus professor. I went to her office hours all the time just because I needed help in that class.” These participants’ examples demonstrate how they are thinking strategically about expanding their networks as they strive for success, in and after college.

Increasing their networks beyond their circles of support are beneficial and increased African American women’s opportunities beyond the ones they already had within their circles of support. For example, Jayde shared how her on-campus work and volunteer experiences have enhanced her sense of success. She said:

I've had so many different campus jobs literally just from my mentors hitting me up and telling me about different jobs. And those jobs have been some of the best experiences
that I've had. I've been working at, and with, the Office of Multicultural Affairs for three years since I was a freshman and I don't make a lot of money, I just do it because I literally love the people and because I love the work that I do. Same thing with the sexual assault and education center. I don't make money there at all, that's just purely based off of volunteering but I'm doing it because I love what I do.

Jayde’s motivation for strategically building networks was not just a function of financial gain but discovering what her interests were and working in those capacities on her campus in student leadership positions.

Sometimes students were motivated to strategically build networks in response to negative experiences on campus. Jayde shared her experience of living in an honors hall on campus that was predominantly white due to her scholarship. Although she wanted to live in the Black community, she was not able to move elsewhere on campus. She said “I couldn't stand that disconnect, so I have to get away from it, but I couldn't get out of my environment because, you know, it was paid for. I had to strategically work my way around it. That was my living situation.” She went on:

I hated it. I hated it. I was like, "I can't do this." So, the year after, I specifically made sure that I have, I call it my melanin corner. I made sure that if I was to live in [predominantly white residence hall] for the rest of these four years. If I also live in [predominantly white residence hall] for the next four years, I need to have a melanin corner, where there would be no roommates in there to judge my hair, judge what I'm doing as a black female, anything like that. And that's exactly what I did. I got a room full of black women and we do our own thing, and we wear bonnets whenever we want to, and we talk about things that like matter to black females, like things I matter to black
people. And, we get it. I would talk about things, I'll talk about my day with these white women and they wouldn't know half the things I'm talking about. They wouldn't get it. And I hate it. I couldn't stand that. Like you can't understand simple things that I'm talking about because you don't get it. You literally can't get it because of the way that you were raised in, culturally grown up.

Jayde’s response demonstrates her strong commitment to create her community strategically in the bounds of what her scholarship permit with her living in a predominantly white environment.

While Jayde was able to build that network, other participants reflected on what it felt like to experience the absence of a Black network. Sarah, for example, talked about what it would mean to have a Black woman professor in her major:

If I had a Black professor in my major, it's like….Okay. She did it. She went through it. And she's also not just representing women, but she's representing me as well as African-American. And like I said, my major ... I've met four girls who are Black and the rest are white, literally. That's all you see. And I guess I might have one Palestinian friend. I don't think we have many Hispanics at all. Probably just the same amount of Black people we have. I just think like, I think like wow. Are all speech pathologists really white? That's all I ever see. Even professors. I guess it kind of worries me a little bit because I'm just like, "Do I have to live with this my entire life?" I don't know…. Definitely if I had a Black professor, it would definitely be a lot ... I feel like I would be able to talk to her more. Like, I don't really talk to my professors like that. I go to office hours when I need to, but I don't connect or just “hey” or have a conversation. But I feel like if I had a Black professor, I would talk to her all the time. I just feel like I would ask her questions all the
time, no matter if I'm in her class or not. Just about the major in general. But yeah. I don't have that, unfortunately. I wish, though.

Sarah’s example illustrates that despite the absence of African American in a predominantly white environment she has a desire to build strategic networks within the African American community. She believes that having an African American professor in her major would provide her with access to knowledge related to being an African American women speech pathologist. The women in this study accessed and employed their interpersonal networks as a strategy to succeed, and they also relied on their intrapersonal senses of self.

**Self**

The final category of findings, self, focuses on participants’ identities and conceptions of their success. Three themes comprise this category: (1) unapologetically me, (2) armor to succeed, and (3) conceptions of success. As a reminder from my conceptual framework, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) helped me to examine African American women's lived experiences and emphasizes viewing participants’ identities and experiences together and not in isolation of each other. Therefore, although many of the participants shared responses that focus on one of many of their identities, it does not mean that the other identities are not interplaying while concentrating on another identity.

**Unapologetically Me.**

This first theme focuses on participants’ understandings of their multiple and intersecting identities. Some participants shared throughout the interviews that they were proud of their identities and would not accept environment artifacts of white supremacy or any other outside influences to diminishing their sense of self. Despite participants sharing countless experiences where they encountered systemic and interpersonal behaviors related to racism, sexism,
heteronormativity, misogyny, and alienation, they did not allow it to deter them from embracing their identities proudly. Tammy shared about her being steadfast in her Christianity despite outside influences, she said:

My identity as a Christian has never shifted. Ever since I became very serious about my faith. It has not once ever shifted. It's ... If somebody was to perhaps change my mind on why I should be a Christian, or should not be a Christian, they're now considered as not relevant or important in my life. I'm like, "If you don't accept me for who I am then I don't know why we're having a conversation.

This example illustrates how Christianity is viewed in society as a privileged identity while often being analyzed and ridiculed for the historical foundation of Christianity. Tammy’s response highlights her unwavering acceptance of her religious identity and the freedom to be her full self in her identity. Similarly, Participants communicated that they did not worry about how others in their campus environment may respond to their most salient identities. Ella, for example, shared, “I am Queer, unapologetic.” Similarly, Jayde said, “I am Black, Queer, and amazing,” and Sarah explained that she does not adjust her identity performativity to accommodate others, she said, “I'm proud of being African-American. I proud to be a woman. I don't change any of those. I have no shame.” Ashley said, “I'm at the point now where I'm going to just be who I am and do what I want to do and whoever accepts it, accepts it, and whoever doesn't, doesn't. We all only have one life to live so why live it trying to make everybody else happy?” These declarations of self-acceptance and self-understanding demonstrated the ways African American women in this study embrace the freedom to live in their identities without validation outside of themselves. Participants also demonstrated how they did not internalize
other’s perceptions. Hannah describes how she does not absorb other people’s issues that they may have with her identity as a Muslim woman, “that's their problem.” She stated:

Here at [ItMoN University], whenever I see that somebody feels uncomfortable around me just because I'm visibly wearing a head scarf. I'm visibly ... Like the color of my skin, I can't change that stuff. If I see people who are uncomfortable, I'll just smile at them. I don't have to necessarily change anything about myself to make them feel more comfortable, because that's not my problem. That's their problem, that they're not comfortable with who I am as a person. So, I don't take anything to heart. If I see someone giving me a dirty look, I'll just smile at them and I'll just continue on with my day. I don't go out of my way to make someone else comfortable with me. I've had experience where sometimes I'll go to the bathroom to fix my hijab and people will just stand there and stare at me. I just look at them through the mirror, and I just smile at them, and I'm just like, "How's your day going?", and stuff like that.

Hannah’s response speaks to being unapologetic about her identity and repelling negative interactions with people who may stereotype her due to her hijab. This example signals that African American women owe no explanation or excuse for any of their multiple identities and do not have to internalize self-doubt in place of their self-love.

While the participants above seemed impervious to outside judgment, some participants talked about not tolerating behaviors that devalue their identities. For example, Mia stated, “I think in a White environment, you really have to stand your ground as like, ‘yes, I'm Black, yes, I'm a woman, but you're not going to treat me any different.’ I refuse to allow that to happen.” Mia’s example illustrates how African American women experience negative interactions on campus but simultaneously refuse unacceptable behavior while demanding respect in turn.
This was not always an easy process for women in the study. Ella described that sometimes being one’s self is dangerous, but she did not allow fear to control her. She reflected:

Choosing to be yourself is one of the most dangerous but liberating things ever. I think that's what pushed me to be a writer and what pushed me to, you know, come out fearlessly. It's because, you know, the only thing I have to fear here is ridicule. I had to fear death back home! So, you know, that just isn't ... It made me okay with choosing, you know, danger. Ancestors fought for me to be able to be myself. So just choosing to not allow homophobia and racism, misogyny to control me.

For Ella, being her full self is “the most dangerous but liberating” feeling and choosing not to be her whole self is not an option, especially when reflecting on the sacrifices of others, like her family and ancestors. Across ItMoN campuses, African American women hold multiple identities that are often minoritized by the environments where they pursue their degrees but remaining silent can have more severe consequences to their identity development.

Some of the participants shared their processes of developing self-awareness and self-acceptance, especially when they held identities they perceived to be in conflict with each other. For example, Jayde described how her queer identity and Christian identity contradicted for a long time and how she hid her queerness out of fear for being shunned during high school. She stated:

My queerness, that's become something near and dear to me in the past. Well no, recent past, because of the fact that it was something that I hid for so long, that I tried to deny for so long, that now I'm in a place, thankfully, where I can let that out and let the flag fly completely. And not be ashamed of it; because before, I'd be ashamed of the fact that
like, "What? No, I can't like guys and girls. That's wrong," but I grew up Christian, so of course that's what I thought. So, having that identity clashing with my religious identity that I held so true to my heart too, was very, very difficult. And now, it's starting to kind of meld together and we're starting to realize that it's more of what I feel rather than a ‘he say, she say’ type thing. That is a truth that I never walked in and I'm very happy to walk it now. And so, I always talk about it (laughter). I was keeping it at the forefront of everybody's mind.

Reflecting on how she hid her queerness during high school and now openly owns her queerness on campus, Jayde said:

I radicalized myself afterwards. I fully stepped into my identity. That's when I was like, you know what? I don't care if anyone knows I'm gay. I don't care. I don't care because it's amazing. You know? I was like, I don't care because I get to have this identity, and that's cool. You know? I didn't have those thoughts before. These thoughts of really appreciating myself and loving myself, and loving these identities that people taught me to hate. That's what [a social justice retreat] taught me, was to love myself radically.

This example signifies how a privileged identity may be experienced as incompatible with other identities that African American women may hold, but through self-acceptance, liberation can be met by living their truth boldly and without fear of judgment from others who have their quarrels with acceptance.

This theme demonstrates the ability that participants had to live out “unapologetically” their multiple identities while resisting silencing or belittling of their identities on their campuses. The next theme, Armor to succeed, focuses on internalizing positive message related to their identities.
Armor to Succeed.

African American women in this study talked about receiving and internalizing positive messages or life lessons that helped to promote their success or affirm their identities. Participants discussed messages that were transmitted to them by people in their networks and the affirmonal language they developed that supported their minoritized identities. Some participants had to overcome micro and macro aggressions, while other participants felt comfortable with themselves on their campus. Also, all participants shared examples where they internalized their own messaging or other messaging from their support networks that nurtured their identities.

Halima shared taking pride in her identities as a child, “From a very young age I was taught to take pride in my culture and so, basically for my whole life I've been involved in our Ghanaian [culture].” Jayde described the messages that she received from her circles of support. She said, “I have all of those positive voices in my head encouraging me to do certain things.” Before their college experience, some participants internalized the messages. Sarah shared what her grandma repeats to her; she stated, “Every time I talk to her she's like, ‘Girl, if I just had half your brain size.’” Raven’s mother encouraged her to take charge, stating, “You are the head and not the tail.” Raven described two strategies that helped her succeed, one of those was internalizing the message that her grandma told her, Raven said her grandma would say, "nothing beats a fail but a try and if people think differently of you, at least you tried," she said that had been one of the most significant contributors towards her success of never being afraid to take opportunities. Her example emphasizes her mindset for always making an attempt to try new opportunities that can promote her success. Other participants had similar experiences of family members, peers,
advocates, professors, or other circles of support, or their self-affirmation uplifting them. 
Neveah reminds herself “that no matter what, I'm just beautiful at the end of the day how I am. Like, yeah, you’re gonna keep growing, and you should be growing because you wanna keep developing all these petals as you blossom into this beautiful rose.” All of these examples demonstrate internalization of affirming messages.

Some of the armor that participants received and internalized from their support networks stemmed from learning life lessons. For example, Gabby discussed:

My dad, older, grew up in rural Mississippi and came to Illinois for work. He never completed high school. My mom is just a high school graduate. They both work blue collar jobs. My dad a retired factory worker and my mom a custodian. Even though they did not have the opportunity to attend college they always reminded me of the importance of education and why getting a higher education is so important. This became a value of mine early on. I knew I was going to do something different something more and I knew that is what they wanted from me.

This example shows how her parents, as a circle of support, helped establish Gabby’s foundation of prioritizing education, which she adopted as a value that guides her toward her success.

Raven shared another life lesson example that helped to prepare her for college success while she was reflecting on her scholarship program that offers seminars as a resource. She shared how the workshops that were intended to be a resource provided “cookie cutter” information that “wasn’t helping” because she already learned some of those life lessons from her mom. Raven explained:

Well, for example, freshman year they were giving transition tips and stuff like that, but most of the students didn't have support from their family members or [there were] things
didn't know. But like for me, my mom already instilled that stuff into me. "Okay, I know that you have to be in the professors face, I know there are scholarship opportunities out there, I know there are research opportunities out there." So, most of the time it would be stuff I already knew. One or two times I learned some new information. Or they would be telling how to budget and I was like "My mom used to teach us how to write checks when we were little," so I knew not everything, but a lot of things about how to budget and how to keep up with your balances. Just because my mom was so involved in all that. And other students there, I don't know how involved their parents were but they took a lot from it! But for me it was things I didn't need.

Raven’s example emphasizes that she already had gained life lessons that helped her to be successful before coming to college from her support network, her mom. This example also highlights one example of the necessity to assess the individual needs of students to better support African American women’s success.

All participants reflected on their past, current, and future aspirations and often reaffirmed themselves after reflecting on their achievements and struggles. Jayde, for example, shared that she dropped a Spanish course because it was no longer beneficial for her and discovered an African American studies course affirmed her racial and religious identities. Jayde said:

And so then, after months of trying to find a new minor and find out, "Okay so what's important to you? What do you like? What do you like to learn about? Who gets you passionate? What gets you passionate?" And I was talking to my friends and I asked a lot of my friends, I asked, "What do you think about me? What do you think gets me going?" And they were very honest with me and knew, you love black people, you love black
people and you love justice. And I'm like, "You're right, you were right." And I stumbled upon African American studies and I love what I'm learning about. It's the best decision that I made. It was hard to come to that conclusion of I have to leave something that I love but I also found something that I'm absolutely in love with. I'm learning about black churches and popular black music. That's dope. I go to class and I'm learning about sermons, you know? Stuff that I already grew up on. And in Spanish class, I did not have that excitement. I wasn't on fire for it and so it was a lot of self-discovery and realizing what's okay to drop and what's okay to nourish my own soul.

Jayde’s example emphasizes an introspective approach that led her towards a course that edified and affirmed her most essential identities. Being in an "African American studies" course that she can learn and internalize positive messaging about her race and religion can positively contribute to her development.

Nevaeh shared how her ancestral roots in Africa inspire a sense of pride and how she physically displays her affirmation on campus. She said:

To me Blackness is just owning your ... Blackness is just identifying your ancestral roots in Africa, and like basically acknowledging that fact. Whether that be you want to wear your hair a certain way, or you don't want to wear your hair a certain way. It's just you identifying that, "This is where my ancestors come from, this is what makes me."

Because to me, I feel like I get happy when I find links between something that I do and something that my ancestors from hundreds of years ago might have done. So, I feel like it's just a sense of home. Like, "Oh, okay. I do have an identity," because so much of it has been stripped away from me. I don't know where my ancestors came from. I don't know what language they might've spoke. I don't know what tribe or what part of what
country they may have been from. So, me putting my hair in French braids and me finding out, "Oh, this is how the warriors used to wear their hair," it's a sense of pride for me. Or me wearing my hair in a twist out. It's a sense of pride for me. Or learning about my history is a sense of pride for me. So, it's just me acknowledging my ancestors. That's just what my Blackness is. It's being myself as well as paying homage to those who came before me.

Neveah’s example illuminates the importance of exposure to history and imagery that positively centers African American and African culture. She was able to connect with the customs of her ancestors that in turn gave her a “sense of pride.”

Luigi listens to inspirational talks that help to encourage her, she said:

So, for me, I loved inspirational talks. That's what gets me up in the morning, it's pretty great because I was so easily influenced in my high school years, I found it you know, why not actually listen to people who are making amazing efforts. So, I listen to a few talks, and they taught me the value of having a supportive team behind you.

Luigi’s example shows how words can motivate and encourage her to “value” supportive people around her.
Reflecting on her identity as a Black woman, Ella expressed:

And standing in our truth and honesty no matter who's around, because we deserve to be that. We deserve to be angry. We deserve to be happy. We deserve to have our career and children and marriage. We deserve everything that we want. And, you know, not allowing our narrative to be shaped by society around us. I feel like being a Black woman is so powerful. Powerful to the point where people take it for granted how majestic Black women truly are. It's the most powerful thing in the world.

Ella’s words signify valuing of herself and declaring that her identities are worthy of happiness, achievement of personal and professional goals. Her self-affirmation that “being a Black woman is so powerful” represents the internalization of acceptance, worthiness, and without bounds.

Circles of support for African American women are a critical component for their success on historically white campuses and should be employed as a strategy to succeed. How African American women view success influences their actions towards achieving success. Therefore, it is essential to understand how African American women conceptualize success.

**African American Women’s Conceptions of Success.**

The range of African American participants’ self-definitions of success speaks to their uniqueness in their identities, experiences, and how their external influences and networks influence their meaning-making. Common definitions included academic achievement (“I’m here to get a degree”), networking to secure future professional goals (“so that you can be prepared for after graduation,"), and developing “life skills and personal development.” Other definitions were specific to “success as achievement of goals” that varied from contentment, prioritizing mental health, becoming a published author, and helping family. Related to academic achievement, Ashley shared, “college success means to go on your potential academically in our
community and socially.” Ashely’s definition of success focuses on academic achievement, volunteering her time in her community, and actively participating with campus social life to “meet a bunch of different people,” fostering relationships. Ashley’s circles of support that include her family, military, and her sorority work in concert to influence her central components of success. Mia definition of success focused on academic achievement and networking intentionally for professional goals; she said she views “success as all passing grades, making networking connections to help me after graduation.” Luigi’s builds on academic and personal success. She said, “Finishing with a degree, growth in life skills, and personal development” were central to her success.

Other definitions focused on persevering through challenges. For example, Alex Lee shared:

College success means achieving an academic goal which you have set for yourself during the time you are a college student, regardless of how difficult the goal is, if you have persevered through challenges and have achieved a major goal and your progress towards your education, you are successful.

Her example highlights those educational components similar to her peers but also builds on persisting and achieving. Similarly, Gabby said, “Excelling within academics and leaving a mark on the campus…. being hard working and being willing to face obstacles and challenges as they occur.” Gabby’s definition includes not only facing challenges as they come but “leaving a mark on the campus,” giving back to communities that they benefited from was a shared perspective between participant’s narratives.

Tammy described success as “being happy, content and satisfied about the hard work you have put into yourself and your college career.” Other participants focused on mental health
goals. Jayde said, “Success means to have a sound mind, as well as developing yourself from an intellectual standpoint. A sound mind to me means having your mental health be at the center of your education.” Jayde’s prioritization of her mental health makes sense in light of the salience of her anxiety and depression. Jayde prioritizes her mental health and education equally and not trading her mental health for her education. Tammy’s and Jayde’s examples demonstrate that their success centers on internal happiness or health and not external factors.

Halima’s description of her success centers on her achievement. She said, “You know success or achievement is not without hard work. Not without the constant effort, you have to put into the journey to get there.” Halima’s definition demonstrates that her characteristics value academic achievement and hard work. Her contributions support that her family encourages her towards these goals. While Hannah shared that “work[ing] towards achieving her goals of helping her family” is a success. These examples delineate myriad motivations behind African American women’s success.

Participants reported encountering challenges to their success. Some participants shared financial difficulties, while others shared self-esteem issues, mental health, time management, academic challenges, or negative interactions on campus. All participants shared that they persisted despite the barriers to their success; most of them viewed their challenges similar to Nevaeh who took each experience as an opportunity to develop. Nevaeh shared:

Everything I may face as obstacles, there's a hundred more advantages to it, and that this only is just a part of a learning experience. That the world is never going to actually be comfortable. There's always going to be something you're going to have to deal with inside the world. It's not going to be perfect, and that this is just like a learning experience….And right now I'm just learning how to navigate the waters of the ItMoN
University, and being my best self, and staying true to myself, and developing myself, and growing on why I'm here. Although there are things that occur that are not always right, and they are not justifiable to me, there are also plenty of ... I just can't always look at the negative basically. I just can't look at the negative because although I had a rude advisor, I had several advisors that were sweet and supportive and that were nurturing. Although I've had some racist comments said to me, I've had plenty of other people be kind and welcoming to me. And so being me just on this campus is weathering the storm because it really is a sun at the end in a rainbow. It is shining so bright at the end of it that no matter how much it may seem like its pouring down rain, it really is cloudy. Not cloudy, but sunny right on the other side of it, and that it’s just a moment in time where you're just uncomfortable, and that your discomfort is valid, but it doesn't determine who you are.

Her words embody many participants that either faced childhood trauma, current challenges on their campus, or in society. All participants had the mindset to persist despite what they encountered and looked at it as an opportunity to grow and refine their driven characteristics to succeed.

These widely varying examples of success are a depiction of the complexity of African American women’s identities and ecological systems. The connection between their multiple identities and experiences with their campus climates and broader climate create opportunities for African American women at HWIs to maximize their success and contributes to their continuous development.
Chapter Summary

This study sought to explore how African American/Black undergraduate women access, create and employ strategies and networks to succeed. From the individual narratives of 15 African American/Black women at HWIs, I identified three categories: (1) environmental influences, (2) networks, and (3) self. Within the three categories, I identified and discussed themes using students’ narratives to explain rich understandings of each category.
CHAPTER 5

Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore how African American undergraduate women attending historically white institutions (HWIs) access, create and employ strategies and networks to succeed. Specifically, this study sought to center African American women and develop strategies for supporting their persistence and success at HWIs. Approaching this research through narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) allowed me to gather the stories of 15 African American undergraduate women at HWIs. I employed this qualitative method for collecting collaborative data through interviews, poems, and a focus group, toward understanding major and minor themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000) in answer to my research questions. I identified eight themes within three categories (Table 3). The 15 African American women in this study identified strategies and networks that suggest multiple opportunities for institutions to embrace, uplift, and foster their success on HWI campuses.

Table 3

Summary of Research Findings: Themes by Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Environmental Influences</th>
<th>Networks</th>
<th>Self</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
<td>• Paradoxical Climate</td>
<td>• “Melanin Corner”</td>
<td>• Unapologetically Me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• White Supremacist Gaze</td>
<td>• Circles of Support</td>
<td>• Armor to Succeed</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Building Strategic Networks</td>
<td>• Conceptions of Success</td>
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Participants in this study do not need saving for succeeding; however, their discussions of their networks demonstrated that advocacy advances success. Their circles of support affirmed and extended opportunities to these African American women. This study debunks the myth that African American women require saving from the oppression or assimilating to the system that
benefits white patriarchy. At the same time, this study does not suggest African American women are "superwomen" who can do anything alone. They do possess that “Black girl magic,” but above all they are humans who can navigate their campuses and succeed. Similar to their ancestors, African American undergraduate women attending HWIs in contemporary times are capable of succeeding and reshaping the environments they occupy. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the implications of this research toward my vision for theory, research, and practice as equitable such that African American women are embraced, honored, and can be their full selves on HWI campuses.

Theoretical Implications

The focus group I conducted helped to refine my conceptual framework and strengthen the theoretical applications I integrated into my framework. The data from my focus groups allowed for additional meaning-making (Creswell & Miller, 2000) and participants to share their ideas in an open and fluid subjective process. My conceptual framework originally included the I-MMDI core and filter in the center to address the micro and macro analyses of the individual experience of African American women at historically white institutions. However, after receiving feedback from participants in the focus group, I reenvisioned the conceptual framework and with their input, I revised the framework (figure 4) to more accurately capture participants’ ecological systems and sense of self.
The participants’ feedback highlighted that despite an individual’s experience, everyone was facing their variation of a maze. Mia shared the following:

… it's different variations to it, but at the end of the day it's still a struggle and it's still a maze and you're still trying to get out and because the only way to get out is for everybody to be together, there's no real way to get out of it. You just gotta navigate and make the best out of it.

Her sentiments bring attention to a critical perspective that the maze represents systemic challenges within the campus environment that African American women face. These systemic obstacles are simultaneously taking place at all levels of their identity, including racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and other discriminatory practices that contribute towards a paradoxical environment. While in the pursuit of degree attainment, these women “gotta go through the thing, you kind of squeeze through and you kind of jump, like a little obstacle course.” The women in my study outline their unique set of obstacles that they are able to overcome with the
help their networks and self despite environment influences. Neveah described the maze as the following:

It's made to kind of keep you in, but you have to really go at it forcefully to get through it. That's how I look at it. Change doesn't happen with little effort, we have to keep hammering at it and hammering at it until we make that little crack. And it's kind of like some people get to squeeze through that crack while others can't.

Her words capture that constant action towards succeeding in a paradoxical campus climate is necessary to employ strategies to help them succeed.

After conducting the individual interviews and focus group, my analysis of the data revealed that “toxic environment” did not account for the perceptions of the women in this study. Therefore, as seen in Figure 4, I adapted the framework to include a Paradoxical Climate instead of labeling the environmental influence as toxic. Paradoxical Climate is more inclusive of the range of perceptions that participants in this study conveyed. Paradoxical Climate acknowledges that the climate on historically white college campuses has elements that are harmful to African American women’s success and factors that promote success. During the focus group, participants described the relationship between the Paradoxical Climate and the Ecological Cooling that captured that the Ecological Cooling provided from their networks acts as a stabilizer within the campus climate. One of the participants, Mia, described the conceptual framework (see figure 4) as:

the heat or the pressure of the red box. Of course, the cooling is never ... it's not going to make it not hot, but it's going to keep you from overheating and keep you from burning out. It's going to keep you from, you know, crushing under the pressure. It's going to keep you from catching on fire. So like when it's super hot outside, okay, you got, you know, your big fan to circulate the room, get your little personal fan to blow directly on. You got all these little support things. It's not going to make it that hot, but it's going to keep you from overheating. It's going to keep you know, I guess sane in the heat... Like even if you end up going into a building that's 100% AC. Guess what? The heat is still going to
be outside. So I don't see it cooling as it taking away the heat or cooling as it to just keep you from overheating or crashing under that pressure.

Mia’s description and other participants’ consensus about ecological cooling stands in contrast with organizational theory, specifically Clark’s (1960a, 1960b, 1980) definition of ‘cooling out’ as institutional limiting of students’ academic aspirations. In my study, ecological cooling is a sustaining buffer to the heat of the paradoxical campus climate.

The contributions of the participants in my focus group is a significant attribute of my conceptual framework and helped to more accurately describe the lived experiences of the 15 African American women in this study. Without including their feedback about my conceptual framework, I would have omitted the opportunity to analyze their experiences further. Adding the maze around the core and filter helps to explain the micro and macro levels better while also considering the context and networks that support these women to succeed on their college campuses.

My intersectional approach to this study helped me to explore participants’ full experiences and moving forward in my scholarship, I can only pursue research questions and methods with the goal of understanding students through an intersectional lens that views them holistically and not as multiple parts. Next, I discuss questions that arose through my process of inquiry and research implications for future scholarship.

**Questions for Future Research**

There are four areas to expand my research, including deeper explorations of social class, identity development, diverse institutional types, and leadership development. In my dissertation, participants described their campus environments with exclusive and inclusive spaces. For example, Ella shared how she experienced one part of campus as an oppressive
environment that privileged students from an affluent social class, while the other side of her campus had lower housing costs “so there are more people of color” who come from lower income families. The interconnectedness of race and social class will be an important area of future study to fully explore environmental influences on African American women’s success.

In my study participants primarily talked about six identity categories: race, gender, religion, sexuality, social class, and ethnic culture. Given the purpose of the study, much of our interview dialogue centered on race and gender. Future research should explore all social identities, including ability, which was not discussed in my study, toward a deeper and more diverse understanding of African American undergraduate women. As I analyzed the data, I realized places in interviews where I missed opportunities to ask probing questions. For example, I realized during analysis that some participants articulated their social class in ways that did not always align with the class issues they shared. Some participants said they came from a "middle class" background, but their stories related to finances and working during school suggested that they were likely from working class backgrounds. In this example, further investigation is needed to understand students’ perceptions of their social class and how it influences and connects with other identities.

While my study asked participants about how they developed their sense of gender and racial identity, additional research focusing on the identity development of African American women would be valuable in expanding existing identity development theory in critical ways. College student development theory is currently in what scholars call a “third wave,” in which contemporary scholars are framing development questions critically and studying identity development expansively (Jones and Stewart, 2016). A more critical and intersectional understanding of identity development can assist higher education and student affairs educators
in supporting students’ holistic development once these women come into the campus environments. Further, this qualitative study explored African American women’s circles of support that help sustain them while they succeed on their campuses. Some of the participants reported conflict with individuals who affirmed most of their identities but in some ways limited their identity development. Additional research could focus on understanding the complex interpersonal relationships of African American undergraduate women’s circles of support. Research might explore the ways support people who affirm specific identities while rejecting others affect students’ identity development and pathways to success.

This study included African American undergraduate women attending large, research institutions located in the Midwest United States. The findings of this study may translate easily to institutions with similar contexts and are not transferable to other contexts. Further research could focus on comparative analyses of the experiences, strategies, and perceptions of African American undergraduate women attending different types of institutions, including large, small, public, private, religious, secular, from diverse geographic regions across the United States. Further, given the role of HBCUs in the longstanding success of African American women in higher education, it will be important to explore similar research that explores their success strategies in HBCU contexts.

This study focused on identifying strategies for success and I learned that all the participants possessed leadership skills that they started to develop before college. Further research may examine the types of opportunities that foster African American women’s leadership attributes and how early opportunities could be extended to and through college to promote African American women’s success and ongoing leadership development. Such research may help existing leadership programs that are often carried out as identity-neutral
to think more inclusively about the ways they engage a more diverse group of current students.

**Implications for Practice: Improving HWI Environments for African American Women**

*This section is written as a feature article (4,000-5,000 words) for consideration in the student affairs practitioner-focused magazine, About Campus.*

Harriet Tubman said, “I have heard their groans and sighs, and seen their tears, and I would give every drop of blood in my veins to free them.” I recently completed my dissertation about African American women’s strategies and networks for success at historically white institutions (HWIs) and as I re-enter higher education and student affairs leadership after four years as a full-time doctoral student, I am called by Tubman’s spirit to articulate the implications of my research for practitioners like me who envision campus environments that are truly inclusive and reward equitable thinking and actions.

In news and research articles, and directly from our students, we constantly hear about institutional inequities and injustices, despite our attempts as a field to liberate marginalized populations on our college campuses. African American college women have never waited for others on their campuses to provide liberation; the only people who consistently liberate Black women are Black women them(our)selves. My recent study identified the ways 15 African American undergraduate women attending six historically white institutions (HWIs) (table 4) access, create, and employ strategies and networks to succeed. The eight findings of my study suggest that African American women do not wait for higher education and student affairs leaders to save them within paradoxical campus climates; instead, these women create space for themselves and other African American women to flourish on their campuses. While the African American women in my study discussed oppressive and erosive campus systems in which they exist under a white supremacist, patriarchal gaze, these women focused their attention on what and who makes them whole while defining and achieving their success. My study articulates the ways that each of the participants’ multiple identities influences how they experience campus and uniquely define their success. But what would historically white college campuses feel and
look like if higher education leaders and student affairs educators broke away from policies, mindsets, and behaviors that impede African American women’s success? What if campus leaders adopted Harriet Tubman’s mindset and radically pursued liberation for African American women? In this essay, I mobilize the implications of my research toward a vision of such a radical pursuit, a vision of strides toward inclusive campuses where African American women do not have to resort to creating counter-spaces to thrive, but can wholly be a part of the institution.

Table 4

*Historically White Institutions Attended by Research Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Institution</th>
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<tr>
<td>Indiana University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Purdue University</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Iowa</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Kansas</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Nebraska-Lincoln</td>
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**Environmental Influences**

The ways the African American women in my study described their six campuses were paradoxical, with some participants even declaring boundaries around physical parts of campus that were either inclusive or exclusive. Participants called their campuses simultaneously welcoming and unwelcoming, and some participants who attended the same institution had diverging descriptions of their campuses.

No matter how they described their campuses, though, all participants reflected on the ways their campus experiences influenced their sense of belonging at the institution. For example, Alex Lee¹, who is Muslim, said, “I remember anytime anyone said anything about

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¹ All participants in my study selected pseudonyms, which I use in this essay.
bombs… that made me so uncomfortable, because people would look at me. And so, any little thing just made me feel like, ‘Oh my gosh, I'm such an outcast.’” In another example, Neveah described her university’s attempt to celebrate Black History Month in ways that were underdeveloped and poorly executed, criticizing the institution for not thinking through the ramifications for African American students. She shared:

…you’ve got to think about the ramifications of saying you’re having a basketball tournament for Black History Month… Why is it a basketball game for Black History Month, or it's supposed to be for appreciation, why is a basketball game appreciation? You need to look at the context that you put that in, and analyze that a little bit more, because it's stereotypical for you to say that a basketball game is a Black History Month appreciation. That's not appreciation to me… I just don't feel like sometimes they think things through all the way and think of the sensitivity that some people may have, or they don't think to put as much effort in to it.

African American women in my study were also influenced by their understandings of their institutions’ histories of oppression. These women were aware that their historically white institutions were built upon exclusion, discrimination, and in some instances, exploitation of African Americans for labor or spotlighting (Winkle-Wagner, 2009) when it benefits the institution. As Neveah shared her critique of the institution’s Black History Month activity, she also critiqued the way her institution spotlighted National Panhellenic Council Greek-letter chapters as entertainment. She said:

… and in the last minute they invite NPHC to come, but we're only invited to things to be entertained and that's disrespectful because it’s like, "Why do you only invite us to things
because you want us to step or you want us to stroll, or you want us to put on a performance for you?”

Neveah’s narrative demonstrates how institutions perpetuate a narrow narrative of African American contributions when using minoritized students as instruments of entertainment. Inviting historically African American Greek-letter organizations to entertain the majority white population with strolling minimizes their diverse attributes and historical and current contributions. Additionally, celebrating Black History Month with a basketball game without “some presentation and [displaying] the accomplishments that Black inventors, artists,[or other Black leaders]” have achieved restrains counternarratives of African American people by perpetuating a stereotype that displays a one-dimensional viewpoint, in this case being entertaining through athletics or strolling.

_In order to improve campus environments toward our vision for liberation, we must acknowledge and work to rectify the historical foundations of our institutions_. Adopting a shared responsibility to learn the historical foundation of an institution’s legacy and then interrogate the ways contemporary practices perpetuate oppressive legacies is one way for higher education and student affairs educators to move toward emancipatory campus climates. Faculty, staff, and administrators should learn their institution’s legacies, including how campus was formed, who built the campus, why buildings are named after certain people, how those donors or namesakes contribute to or contradict the contemporary mission of the institution, and how the institution’s legacy influences the perceptions of students. Black women on HWI campuses are often the ones who research this knowledge, then rally, educate, highlight, expose, question, and problematize historical inequalities that contribute towards modern day paradoxical campus environments. Taking a proactive restorative justice approach toward past wrongs enacted on
African American women is necessary. *Institutions must acknowledge intended or unintended harm produced and reproduced by white supremacist thought.* Prioritizing the celebration of African American people should not only be reserved for Black History Month. Campus leaders and educators should ask themselves what it could look like for institutions to integrate the achievements of African American women within the culture of campus. There are opportunities for student affairs educators to address inadequacies and injustices on their own campuses.

Some participants attended a HWI that, in 2018, opened a new residence hall named for a renowned African American woman artist who earned her graduate degree at the university. While the artist was a student at the institution in 1938-1940, she was not allowed to live on campus because residence life engaged in racial segregation until 1945. In the new residence hall, where thousands of students flock every day for meals in the popular dining hall, the artist’s sculptures and prints pepper the hallways, mostly depicting African American women. With her art seamlessly integrated throughout the hall and her name on the building itself, along with a two-story mural that tells of her life and legacy, students at the HWI cannot ignore this woman’s place in the institutional story. This is one example of an institutional attempt to acknowledge and rectify a problematic legacy.

Another opportunity my research helped me see as a higher education and student affairs educator is to identify and deconstruct exclusive spaces on campus. African American women in my study described their campuses as inclusive and exclusive, depending on where they were on campus. For example, Ella described her campus this way:

*If I'm on West campus, wonderful. Very open, inclusive, understanding, diverse. Mainly because West campus has the least, like, costly housing. So, there are more people of color on this side of campus, because a lot of us come from lower income families.*
that being said, on East campus, that’s where a lot of the racist white students are. A lot of the pompous, rich students are. A lot of the trust fund babies are… when I have to go to that side of campus, I know that I’m going to get into a debate.

Ella’s sense of campus is informed by who lives in what residence halls and she notes the intersection of social class and race. Student affairs educators should create equitable housing options that do not limit the spaces that African American women from lower socioeconomic statuses can occupy. Most housing systems are profitable operations that focus on generating capital without consideration of implementing equity-based value objectives. Allocating a number of rooms at an affordable price based on a student’s financial background in higher-priced residence halls is one way to promote a more equitable environment. Institutions can customize this approach by identifying the number of students who could be excluded from having the option to live in the more expensive housing on campus and then setting that specific amount of rooms aside and subsidizing them to these students at a lower cost. Identifying areas and redistributing power in exclusive spaces that hold patriarchal, affluent, white supremacist privilege is neccessary. Student affairs educators should work towards changing who is able to live in and dominate these spaces, which will help to address this imbalance that exists on college campuses.

Accountability is another critical piece to addressing current inequities on our campuses. Many of us travel through airports, where we frequently hear, “if you see something, say something.” But when it comes to our most precious cargo on college campuses, our students, we don’t seem to hold that same expectation. When we see discrimination, sexism, racism, classism, and any other exclusionary practice, we must speak up and out. Yes, it can be difficult to tell someone, “Hey, what you said in that meeting was racist and here’s why,” but African
American women have been doing it since we joined the profession and you can do it, too. Being a complacent bystander keeps power with the oppression that lingers at the surface of every campus, and if more of us can speak up and out toward educating ourselves and each other, we can disrupt that power. Further, institutions should appoint a person in every department who reinforces accountability for equitable practices. Let’s be clear, the goal is for this to be everyone’s responsibility, but until we reach that promised land, we must start somewhere. As student affairs practitioners, if we want to support our words with our actions, then establishing built-in accountability systems within our departments and overseen by a senior administrator whose sole responsibility is to hold the department accountable is imperative for changing the oppressive practices of our campuses. Until institutions establish an interwoven system of accountability, we must rely on our networks.

Networks

Creating networks that sustain and develop our multiple identities on our campuses is critical. One idea that stems from my research, called “Melanin Corner,” came out of countless conversations one of the participants, Jayde, had with white women who lived in her residence hall that questioned the most salient part of her outward identity, her race. After Jayde started to wear her hair natural, she quickly got tired of the numerous questions about her hair care from white women. When she walked around with a bonnet on, she said they would say, “What is that? Oh, my God.” Or look at [her] like…”some type of museum artifacts.” She said she “hated it,” so Jayde used her autonomy to actively recruit other African American women to live with her in the predominantly white honors hall on campus. She said, “I got a room full of Black women and we do our own thing, and we wear bonnets whenever we want to, and we talk about things that, like, matter to Black females…” Jayde’s actions bring attention to the importance of
counterspaces that provide liberation from dominant, oppressive spaces. Student affairs professionals have the opportunity to intentionally create what Jayde referred to as “Melanin Corners” that uplift African American women in spaces where they are able to openly discuss things that “matter to Black females.” Counterspaces are imperative for historically minoritized and marginalized students on college campuses (Grier-Reed, 2010; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). For example, cultural centers have become crucial for providing historically minoritized and marginalized students counterspaces (Patton, 2010). Student affairs educators can prioritize budgetary and human capital resources towards creating and sustaining counterspaces that uplift, honor, and value African American women while they pursue their education. These counterspaces could range from identity specific cultural centers and student organizations to residence halls or floors specifically dedicated to the uplift of African American women.

Student affairs educators can also personalize the lessons from the African American women in my study by building circles of support and strategic networks. Establishing circles of support -- people who keep you grounded, accountable, and with whom you are able to be vulnerable when discussing equity and social justice challenges -- is critical for thriving as equity-minded practitioners. Who are your circles of support? For the women in my study, circles of support were comprised of family, friends, former teachers and mentors, and past colleagues. For student affairs educators, do we rely on the same communities as our support? What about the cohort from your master’s program? Or other student affairs educators at your institution with whom you can have honest dialogue and brainstorm ideas that will help to sustain you while you champion just student experiences on your campus? Circles of support can help remind us all who we are while pursuing our goals as professionals.
This concept also suggests another opportunity for student affairs educators -- to identify African American women’s circles of support so that we can support our students holistically. As we build rapport with our students, we should be asking questions like, who supports your success in college and in what ways? This can open up dialogue to signal who students consider to be in their circles of support and help with future conversations. Students seek out student affairs educators for a number of reasons, sometimes it may be an advisor, hall director, fraternity and sorority life professional, but when they come to us with a challenge we should be ready to ask questions that incorporate their circles of support. Once we know who makes up our students’ circles, it is on us to remember and then use our knowledge as we support students. For example, I may ask a student leader who comes to me with an issue, have you spoken to your (family, sorority sisters, partner) about this? By incorporating the people who are most important to my student, I can customize and maximize care. In my study, Neveah experienced an academic advisor who did not grasp this concept of customized support. She is a nontraditional student and single mother who lives a distance from her campus that required two buses and sometimes ride share for her to reach campus. Instead of connecting with Neveah and identifying her circles of support, her advisor suggested that college was “not for” her due to her transportation issues. Her advisor missed the opportunity to help Neveah navigate her resources. Neveah switched majors and stopped pursuing her degree for a while. When she returned to college, her new advisor identified who was in her circle of support and quickly began to identify resources. The new advisor asked Neveah questions that developed trust between them, so much so that Neveah shared her time and transportation challenges with the advisor. Realizing Neveah’s son was important to her circle of support, the advisor pursued ideas and resources to support Neveah having more time with him. She took out a bus schedule and helped Neveah
map a new, shorter bus route. She sought out funding that would elevate Neveah working multiple jobs so she could focus on her studies during her days and have more time to spend with her son in evenings and on weekends. Neveah shared with me how her advisor cared and supported her success and became an important part of Neveah’s circle. Knowing our students and building relationships is fundamental to personalizing our support for students and should always be prioritized in our work. Students’ circles of support are interwoven in their lives and can shape their experiences; therefore, student affairs educators must avoid assuming we know who is sitting in front of us and instead develop strong relationships with our students. In addition to the circles of support they bring intact when they start college, we should also assist students in developing strategic networks.

Developing strategic networks is necessary for African American college women and should be supported by student affairs educators for them to grow. Leveraging the social capital of student affairs professionals can elevate African American women’s college experience. The women in my study demonstrated that building relationships with professors, staff members, and their peers helped to mitigate challenges within their environment. They were able to learn about opportunities to enhance their development and ask questions of a reliable and trustworthy source. For example, Ella shared how she developed a network of resources amongst other African American students in her residence hall and African American upperclassmen who looked out for each other. She shared how they check in on one another and “people bring us[them] food when we[they] can't afford it. It's just like, a really safe space, where we can have an open dialogue and just different things like that.” Delilah shared how she benefitted from her relationship with her English professor, who recommends her for opportunities, programs, and workshops. Delilah was able to secure an internship with her professor which enabled her to
take a “400-level writing class upon her recommendations.” Encouraging students to build relationships that can help them develop personally and professionally can make a difference in their success.

*Student affairs educators can also benefit from building strategic networks within and outside the field of higher education.* If we first assess what skills or resources are necessary to move initiatives forward on campus or continue to grow in our own development, we can then build networks accordingly. Creating networks from other institutions or outside of the field to form liberation circles helps to expand knowledge, foster innovation, and accountability from multiple levels. Student affairs educators should strategically seek out networks when attending conferences, not only ACPA or NASPA, but also NCORE, the White Privilege Conference, or research conferences such as ASHE or AERA. Doing so expands the opportunity to not only build strong coalitions but gain knowledge outside of our comfort zones. Furthermore, we should build networks across campus and within our local communities to identify emerging issues and strategize equity-focused solutions. In our communities, we could create weekly or monthly social justice meetings to discuss issues and create space for forward-thinking action.

Also, inviting individuals who have diverging ideologies into our networks is necessary. Many of us spend a lot of time speaking to other social justice advocates and do not practice speaking with individuals who have opposing views. Not inviting the opposition to challenge our mindsets and practices creates complacency on a never-ending will of congruent thinking. Inviting opposition can be challenging and draining, but this is a critical component to assessing and addressing systemic issues. Student affairs educators can employ Watt’s (2015) method of entering difficult dialogue focusing on a “third thing” like poetry, music, or art, a strategy that helps to shift difficult dialogue from them vs. us to focus on issues. Higher education has largely
become stagnant when it comes to our diversity and inclusion goals, stopping short of sustainable actions that have the potential to create substantial and generational change. Building strategic networks can break us out of these stagnant cycles.

Another strength of strategic networks is changing the culture from the ground up. The system of higher education rewards individuals that assimilate or perpetuate the policies and traditions of the past and much like the women in my study do not wait for those in positional power to make change, we must make change ourselves. Higher education institutions should be a breeding ground for novel ideas that flush out they longstanding oppressive system that supports the many and creates a psychological cost for the few. For example, student affairs professionals who identify a problem that impedes on African American women’s success and then propose a solution should be rewarded and supported by the institution. As a practitioner overseeing resident assistants during my earlier years in the field, I remember challenging my staff to be proactive by identifying problems within our community and discovering solutions. Once they identified opportunities to make their communities better, they brought their idea back to the larger group and shared with the rest of our team. The group share helped team members to customize ideas and create positive outcomes in their areas. As the supervisor for my team, I made sure that their work was elevated to a broader audience by sharing with other supervisors who then shared with their teams. Sharing the responsibility of problem-solving helps to cultivate a campus that is team-centered and mobilizes students and student affairs educators to use their agency.

Another action item my research calls for is integrating African American women in higher education programs, curricula, and support systems that lead to greater visibility and positive outcomes for African American women. Participants in my study had a desire to learn
about themselves. Jayde reported one example, she described what she was learning in her African American studies class: “I'm learning about black churches and popular black music. That's dope.” Hannah also shared how she was excited to learn her native language because her school recently added a Somalian course to the curriculum. Integrating identity into the curriculum is a part of centering African American women, but the lack of African American women faculty also influences the ways that undergraduate African American women develop. For example, Sarah expressed a strong desire for an African American woman professor. She said, “If I had a Black professor in my major, it's like….Okay. She did it. She went through it. And she's also not just representing women, but she's representing me as well as African-American.” These participants’ examples signal the gap in representation of African American women in curricula and higher education in general. Student affairs educators should support institutional moves to increase representation of African American women faculty, as well as curricular development that includes scholarship produced by African American women. In student affairs work directly, we should be including and promoting African American women in campus leadership, and inviting them to speak on our campuses on a variety of issues. I do not suggest that these efforts that center African American women only be shared with their gender or racial groups. These efforts need to be applied campus-wide to make an institutional shift and will help foster an affirming psychological climate.

**Exploring and Articulating Self**

Student affairs educators have a prime opportunity to promote self-discovery in students. Fostering exploration of what makes them unique and powerful is critical for them navigating environments that have the potential to ostracize or denigrate their wellbeing. Therefore, helping them to identify affirming messaging that counteracts negative world views towards their
identities will help them not internalize oppressive language or behaviors. Assisting students to name the things that they love about them helps to replace potential hatred. The world tells us[students] what we[they] are not. Therefore, we must help each other recall the power in being ourselves by embracing our one of a kind characteristics.

Student affairs should borrow a page from the participants in my study. The participants in my study became okay with not internalizing others’ problems. For example, Hannah described being a Muslim African American on her campus, and receiving unpleasant looks, she said, “That's their problem, that they're not comfortable with who I am as a person. So, I don't take anything to heart. If I see someone giving me a dirty look, I'll just smile at them and I'll just continue on with my day. I don't go out of my way to make someone else comfortable with me.”

As student affairs professionals, we often go out of our way to seek acceptance or approval, which keeps us stuck in the day in and day out institutional oppressive cycles despite our calling to make change. The system no longer needs this type of student affairs educator, it needs bold, unapologetically personas that will be okay if someone else is uncomfortable because they are working from an equity viewpoint and moving towards an inclusive campus. The field calls for student affairs professionals to armor their selves like the women in this study, recalling their purpose for entering the field of higher education. Doing so will take sacrifices, vulnerability, and strategic actions towards the goal. Fear of social or professional mobility creates bondage for us to not speaking the truth about a flawed system because we want to get hired in that very system to inform positive change. But, as a field if we want to get serious about what the next decades will look like for future generations, then we have to stop running in circles and slowly shift the power where it counts the most. Three things student affairs educators can implement include: developing critical consciousness and skills that help a person take action against
oppression (Mustakova-Possardt, 2003), becoming informed about issues, and engaging as part of the solution.

Becoming critically conscious student affairs educators will help us examine our attitudes towards students, each other, and campus culture. If we as a field cannot lean in on ourselves and colleagues about our biases, then why should we lead students in this work? For example, have you ever witnessed a colleague being pushed out or silenced because they asked too many questions while trying to move the institution toward inclusion? We must interrogate and seek to understand our own and each other’s decisions as they relate to social justice in ways that uncover biases. However, calling out and working on biases cannot be done if we are not informed.

We cannot assume that since we all are in higher education, we know or we learned the same things about diversity, multiculturalism, and equity. Education in these areas is often not a perquisite to working in our field, and unfortunately, many in our field stop actively learning after graduate school. We must create workplace norms that cultivate learning by not assuming people are ignorant nor fully informed, norms that will foster honest work environments where people can be transparent about what they do not know in order for us to grow as individuals and as a field. Our field has become a place that everyone wants to look like an expert, but lacks the knowledge to enact collaborative and cultural change.

Finally, student affairs educators do well identifying problems and stop short of addressing the issues. The system has privileged and empowered individuals who only benefit some students while allowing the others to figure it out for themselves. Power reparations in our institutions has to happen along with financial support for understaffed departments that are told to carry out diversity and inclusion initiatives and programming for populations like African
American women. The 15 women in my study when identifying strategies that helped them succeed did not stop at failed attempts but kept trying new strategies until they identified what helped them succeed. Institutions must do the same, and it starts with the people. Culture shift does not have to come from the top, it can be from within or from the bottom, either way we have to hold each other accountable for liberation.

Summary and Conclusion

This study’s theoretical, research, and practical implications highlight a pivotal direction for our field towards understanding how to cultivate an inclusive campus climate for African American women to continue to succeed. Borrowing a line from Luigi’s poem, “I am done sending young adults to their deaths because I do not want to open my ears.” As a field, we have stopped listening and mobilizing around our students’ immediate needs. African American women deserve our attention and action to create inclusive campus climates where they can be unadulterated, liberated, successful students on a campus that values their multiple identities. I am not interested in perpetuating a culture on our campuses that liberates the few while the others psychologically or physically die. Echoing the words of Harriet Tubman, “I had reasoned this out in my mind, there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other for no man should take me alive.” The time has come where we decide our legacy that we will leave for the student affairs educators who will come after us. I choose liberation over systemic oppressive death that has riddled our institutions for too long. Student affairs professionals have an obligation to move towards liberation for all students, including African American women on their historically white campuses. Referencing back to Harriet Tubman, we must move towards liberation together or die with an erosive and perpetual system that seeks to isolate and destroy those who speak up, speak out, and question the system.
that they try every day to change for the betterment of historically minoritized and marginalized students. College campus leaders have an opportunity to be proactive and restorative by finding opportunities to redistribute the power that creates an imbalance for African American women on their campuses. Creating networks is just one small piece of a giant jigsaw puzzle towards moving closer to creating an inclusive campus by addressing environmental influences, strengthening networks, and exploring self, our core. Acknowledging the critical part each of these elements plays as student affairs educators helps us to address the source of systemic issues and not just the symptoms; these strategies contribute towards psychological and physical equity-minded reparations on our campuses.
APPENDIX A

Recruitment Email

Invitation for African American undergraduate women to participate in a research study.
Dear [name of staff/faculty member]:
My name is DaVida Anderson, I am a doctoral student in Higher Education and Student Affairs. I am reaching out to request your assistance in identifying potential participants for my dissertation research. I am conducting a qualitative study of African American undergraduate women’s conceptions of success and the strategies and networks they access, create, and employ toward that success as students at [name of institution]. Please forward the email below to the African American women you serve/teach or to your networks that may assist me in identifying African American undergraduate women at [institution].
I am grateful for your support in helping me identify students for this study. If you are interested in the study findings, please let me know and I will be happy to share a summary of the study after the completion of the dissertation.
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Dear African American undergraduate women:
My name is DaVida Anderson, I am a doctoral student in Higher Education and Student Affairs. I am also the Founder/Executive Director of Strong Sister, Silly Sister, Inc., which provides first-year college women, most of whom are African American, interactive educational information, networking opportunities, and motivation to achieve success by embracing ethical behaviors.

I invite you to participate in a research study about the strategies and networks that African American/Black undergraduate women access, create, and employ to succeed during college. Interested students should fill out this brief survey African American Undergraduate women at HWI Research Study (https://uiowa.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cZpbjNpBEYdEMmx). If you are selected to participate in the study, you will (a) complete one 60-90-minute semi-structured interview and (b) write a poem using a provided framework that describes your conception of success. The interview will take place using Zoom, a web-based video conferencing tool that will provide me the ability to interview research participants using voice and video across the internet in real-time.

Upon completion of participation as it is described above, participants will each receive a $20 gift card to Amazon.com delivered electronically to their .edu email address. Participants may then opt-in to a focus group with other African American women in the study; however, participation in the focus group is not required to receive the $20 Amazon.com gift card.

Participants will select pseudonyms to be used in the study and all names of offices, organizations, and other people will be changed to maintain confidentiality. If you are interested in participating, please complete the interest form by clicking on the link https://uiowa.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cZpbjNpBEYdEMmx

Thank you!

[DaVida L. Anderson signature]
APPENDIX B

Semi-Structured Protocol for 60-90 Minute Interview with African American Undergraduate Women

Study Purpose & Interview Set-Up: Thank you for your participation today. My name is DaVida Anderson, and I am a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Iowa. I am conducting this study to understand the strategies and networks African American/Black undergraduate women access, create, and employ to succeed. This interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes and will be recorded. While Zoom allows us to see each other by video, I will only save the audio recording of our interview.

Please confirm that you selected [participant pseudonym] as your pseudonym for this study (wait for a verbal confirmation). After this interview, you will receive a $20 Amazon gift card to the .edu email address provided on your online interest form.

Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Interview: Start recording, confirm it is working, then state:
“This is DaVida, interviewing [participant pseudonym] on [date].”

I. Develop rapport
In the first few minutes, I want to learn about your life before and at the beginning of college.
1. First, tell me about your experiences growing up.
   a. What groups and communities were you a part of? Who was important to you and in what ways? (Prompt for people and organizations that were important to them.)
2. Tell me about your transition to college. What was that like?
   (Prompt for socialization experiences, living arrangements, roommates, living learning communities (LLC), classmates, advisors, etc.)

II. Centering Self in Context
1. On the form you completed online, you described several aspects of yourself, such as your race, gender, sexuality, social class, etc. Tell me a bit about what’s most important to who you are. What aspects of your identity are most salient to you?
   a. Does that shift at all depending on where you are or who you’re with? Tell me more about that.
   b. What outside forces influence your sense of self? (Prompt for macro and exosystem forces, such as racism, misogyny, religious doctrine, political environment etc.)
   c. In what ways has your sense of who you are changed during college?
   a. What prompted the change?
   d. Tell me about a time in college that you believe you were treated differently because of who you are. What happened? What is important about this and why?
e. Tell me about a time in college when you could be your full self, meaning who you are was genuinely appreciated or valued. What happened? What is important about this and why?

III. Now I want to hear how you view your campus climate. First, I will share with you the definition of campus climate (Share with the participant the definition on the computer screen using the share tool in zoom and read the definition out loud).

Campus Climate Definition- A shared understanding of ideology, culture, policies, and behaviors of campus community members, including administration, faculty, staff, students, alumni, and the local community. Campus climate refers to the perceptions of how members in the campus community feel valued, treated, listened to in the environment (Henry, Fowler, & West, 2011).

a. How would you describe your campus climate?

b. What does it feel like to be you on your campus?

c. What do you like about your campus climate?

d. What would you change about your campus climate?

IV. Strategies and Sources Toward Success

1. Now I want to learn more about your college success. On your online form, you described success as [read from qualtrics form]. Does that definition or description capture how you think about success today?

2. Now I want to hear about the strategies you use to succeed in college. Please tell me what strategies you use to succeed.

a. What is important to you about what you just shared?

b. How did you develop these strategies?

c. How do you handle challenges to your college success? What about this is important to you and why?

3. On your online form, you shared that the following things or people supported you toward your success: [read from qualtrics].

4. Is anything missing from this list – either from your campus or off-campus support networks?

5. Let’s talk about each source of support:

a. Tell me a little bit about [source of support from list].

b. How did you become a part of [network]?

c. What has been the most important thing about being a part of this network?

d. What is the best thing about being a part of this network?

e. What is the worst or hardest thing about being a part of this network?
i. How has [support A from list] helped you toward your success?
f. Describe how this network informs who you are as a student on this campus.
g. Describe what it feels like to be your full self.
i. In what ways does [support] affirm and/or limit your full sense of self?

V. Now I would like you to construct a poem using this framework. [Share Appendix G with them via the zoom share tool and read the instructions. Give student time to complete the poem, then ask them to share each word so I may type it and then read it out loud.]

1. What are your thoughts after writing and reading your poem?

I realize my questions may not have prompted you to talk about everything you wanted to in regards to your experiences on campus. Is there anything else that comes to mind as you reflect on your experiences?

The time with you has been very insightful learning about your experiences as a student and especially as an African American/Black woman attending a historically white institution.

Thank you again for agreeing to talk with me about your experiences.

Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you, that concludes our interview.

[Stop recording.]

Follow-up notes:

1. Save the audio file to computer drive using student’s pseudonym and send file to transcription service.

2. Email the student the amazon gift card.
APPENDIX C

I Succeed Poem (adapted from “Where I’m From,” by George Ella Lyon)
Please fill in the blanks to draft your poem.

I am ______________________________ .
   (description of yourself)

I am a part of __________________________ and from ____________________________ .
   (description of your family)     (description of your hometown)

I am successful with the help of ____________________________________________
   (describe an attribute or someone that helps you succeed in college)

________________________________________  ,  ________________________________
   (adjective)  (adjective)  (sensory detail)

I am ______________________________ ,
   (plant, flower, natural item)

________________________________________
   (description of above item)

I am ____________________________ and ______________________________
   (name a source of support)      (another source of support)

I am ____________________________ and ______________________________
   (description of support network characteristic)        (another one)

I am ____________________________ and ______________________________
   (something you were told during college that helped you succeed) (another)

I am ______________________________ ,
   (description of your identity) (further description)

I am ______________________________
   (use adjectives to describe your home place and family ancestry)

_________________________ ,
   (a food item that represents your experience at historically white institution) (another food item…)

I am ______________________________
   (specific story about a specific person who helped you succeed)

I will create ______________________________
   (describe a campus climate that embraces you as your full self)
(line explaining the importance of an inclusive campus)

I am

(line explaining the importance of your identities)

(line describing the importance of your success)
APPENDIX D

Focus Group Invitation

I invite you to participate in a focus group to understand further about the strategies and networks that African American/Black undergraduate women access, create, and employ to succeed during college. The focus group will be approximately 90-minute semi-structured interview and will take place using Zoom, a web-based video conferencing tool that will provide me the ability to interview research participants using voice and video across the internet in real-time.

Participants will select pseudonyms to be used in the focus group and all names of offices, organizations, and other people will be changed to maintain confidentiality.

To participate please confirm the following date and time, ____________ by emailing me at davida-anderson@uiow.edu by _______________ (date one week from date of email). I will follow-up with a confirmation email that will include the zoom link information.

Thank you!
DLA Signature
APPENDIX E

Welcome, thank you for participating in this focus group geared towards understanding the strategies and networks African American/Black undergraduate women access, create, and employ to succeed. This focus group will last 60-90 minutes.

You were selected because you all are undergraduate African American attending historically white institutions.

Guidelines
There are no right or wrong answers, only differing points of views and I welcome you to freely express your perspective as we discuss your experiences during the next hour.

I am audio recording this focus group so that I can have it transcribed. Please use your pseudonym that you have established before this focus group. Your data will be de-identified to help protect your confidentiality. When referring to organizations, people, or groups please use a pseudonym to protect confidentiality.

Since I am an audio recording, it is important that one person speaks at a time.

You don't need to agree with others, but you must respectfully listen as others share their views. Please turn off your phones during the duration of this focus group. If you cannot and if you must respond to a call, please do so as quietly as possible and rejoin us as quickly as you can.

My role as moderator will be to guide the discussion
Please talk to each other and ask each other questions.

I will start with some questions to get the conversation started.

Open ended questions will be accompanied with follow up questions as dialogue flows:

What contributes towards your college success?

What or who helps you succeed during college?

What is your closes identity and why?

Describe your ideal college campus that will embrace you and your most important identities. What would it look and feel like?

Reflecting on your college experience, what do you like the most about it?
REFERENCES


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